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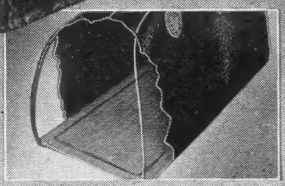

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XXXIX, No. 3 *A THRILLING PUBLICATION* December, 1946

A Complete Novel

SILVER MOUNTAIN

By STEUART M. EMERY

It's a merry free-for-all in the mining town of Eureka when Dynamiter Blaster Breen joins forces with a Parisian barber to give some whiskery hombres a badly-needed trimming! 11

Two Complete Novelets

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When gunsmoke peril hovers menacingly over the range, Sheriff Harv Ryland of Splitrock takes a chance—and tries setting a thief to catch a thief!

COWBOY COMEDOWN.....Syl MacDowell 58
Swap Bootle and Whopper Whaley, those rollicking, wandering waddies, face a fate far worse than death—the prospect of plenty of good hard work!

Short Stories

TROUBLE ON HORSEBACK.....Jackson Cole 34
The Y Bar W pards pit themselves against a passel of sidewinders

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Young Deputy Wayne tries a scarey weapon when quick action's needed

YELLOW FEVER.....Harold F. Cruickshank 70
When the gold bug bites Ten Glavin, there's nothing can stop him

QUICKSAND.....Gladwell Richardson 79
Homesteader Herb Morris turns the tables on his would-be killers

Special Features

THE HITCHING RAIL.....Buck Benson 6
A chatty department where range riders get toegther

HOW WELL DO YUH KNOW YORE WEST?.....Quiz Feature 39
Five questions tuh test yore range savvy

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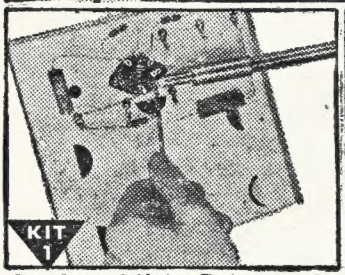

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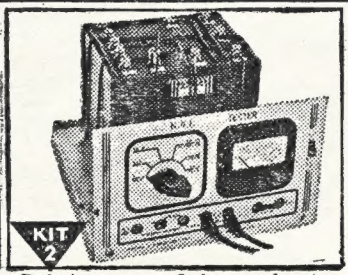
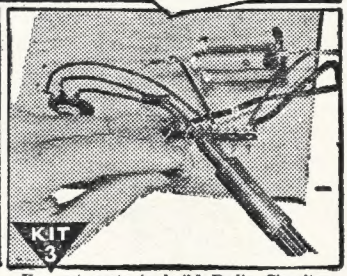


Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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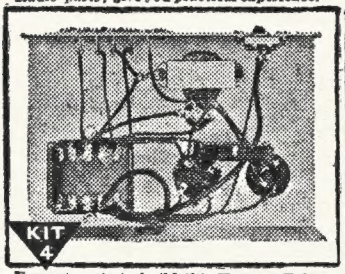

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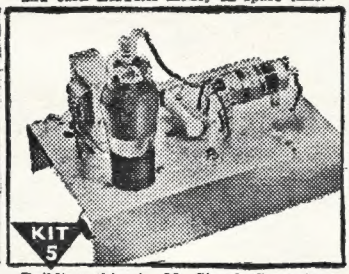

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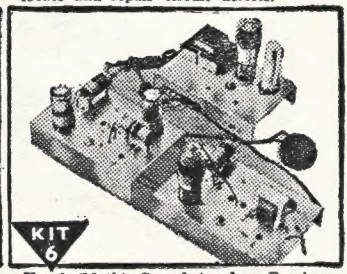

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YES SUH, folks, it's a fact, people travelin' through the old minin' town o' Tombstone, Arizona, celebrated for its rich silver mines and general hell-raisin' in its boomtown days, are sure likely to be thrown into jail if they ask to be taken to the hotel.

The officials o' the town o' Tombstone have give out a warnin' to that effect. So, if you get one o' these picture post cards from a travelin' friend informin' you he's spendin' the week-end in jail in Tombstone, don't break a leg in your hurry to bail him out. Though his statement won't be far from the truth.

The Hoosegow Hotel

What the citizens o' the town have done is convert the big old buildin' that once served as a court house-jail into a modern hotel, their way o' solvin' the housin' shortage.

Durin' the late seventies and early eighties, when the silver boom was at its peak, and the town was a riot o' drink, gamblin', and general lawlessness, a big buildin' was erected and served as both jail and court house. And the stout buildin' has survived the years.

Now, if when stoppin' off in Tombstone, you're met by a welcomin' committee statin' they're gonna throw you in the hoosegow (from the Spanish *husgado,* meanin' jail,) submit quietly, and you'll land in a comfortable hotel.

The First Silver Mine

Some public spirited citizen can be persuaded to point out the landmarks o' former days, if you're interested, no doubt. It was at Tombstone, then just wide open desert peopled by Injuns, horned toads, and jack rabbits, that Ed Schieffelin, prospector, discovered the first silver mine in that region.

Schieffelin was told, when he started into that wasteland with pick and shovel, that all he'd find would be his own tombstone.

Hostile Indians were a constant danger to a lone man, and no-one believed there was any silver to be found there, anyway. But Schieffelin was a persistent sort of a cuss, and he struck it rich!

Havin' a keen imagination and a knack for namin' things, he named his first strike "Tombstone," and the town that sprung up soon after was named the same.

The Rush Begins

The first mad rush o' men huntin' silver started in right away, just as soon as it was known the precious metal had been found. And the rush brought in a whole slough o' tough characters—gamblers, thieves, two-gun men, claim jumpers, and women of a sort to match the tastes o' the men.

There were hombres that'd shoot a man in the back for the contents of his poke, and others who were good company and fair citizens 'til they'd drunk too much red-eye. Then tempers would flare, and there'd be another killin' in Tombstone.

These killin's grew so numerous folks sort o' got used to sayin' to one another, "There's a man for breakfast," meanin', of course a "dead" man. It happened so often they took it pretty casual, all except a few men and women who banded together and tried to do somethin' about it.

Enter the Earp Brothers

The famous Earp brothers were sent for to clean up the place. They'd already made quite a reputation for theirselves as able peace officers in other lawless places. But the Earps and their bosom friend, Doc Holliday, were mighty handy with firearms, and

(Continued on page 8)

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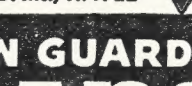

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

they set to work to clean out their own personal enemies, as well as the bad element o' the minin' town.

All in all, the Earps, and a few others assistin', kicked up a pretty high dust with powder and lead, and spilled a plumb sight o' blood at the celebrated O.K. Corral fight, as well as at other places.

It turned out that when the Earps left Tombstone it was in a hurry, and pursued by a sheriff's posse.

Buckskin Frank Leslie

In Tombstone they'll tell you about Buckskin Frank Leslie, among other wild characters o' the time.

Leslie was one o' the hombres mentioned above who seemed okay, so far as anyone could judge, until he'd tossed off a few too many.

When the man drifted into town he took his place among the population quietly, said he was a ex-government scout newly come from Texas, and proceeded to make hisself popular with men and women alike.

He was a well-built, middle-sized gent, and dressed hisself in stylish clothes like a dandy. He often wore a Prince Albert coat, checked trousers, and a stove pipe hat.

But he come by his nickname o' "Buckskin" from the vest he wore while tendin' bar. That was his trade—bartender.

Good at Shootin'

Soon after he hit town he took pains to show folks how good he was at shootin'. And he was plenty good—never missed a target. But he holstered his guns after demonstratin' his skill, and seemed to enjoy quietly mixin' in the night life o' the place.

He spent his money free as water, and was liked by men and women, too, but was jest a shade too popular with the ladies for some people's taste.

His first murder after comin' to Tombstone was of the husband o' a woman he'd took a fancy to. It's true the husband and wife wa'n't livin' together, but the man, Killeen, was still keepin' a eye on his wife's friends as well as on her own behavior.

One evenin' when the moon was shinin' bright Killeen took up a position on the balcony o' the hotel where his wife was livin' and seein' Leslie and the lady come down the street, laughin' and talkin' together, he started a row. Leslie shot him dead. After a little while he married Killeen's widow.

It wasn't long after that before Leslie was launched on a career o' murderin', seemed

(Continued on page 90)

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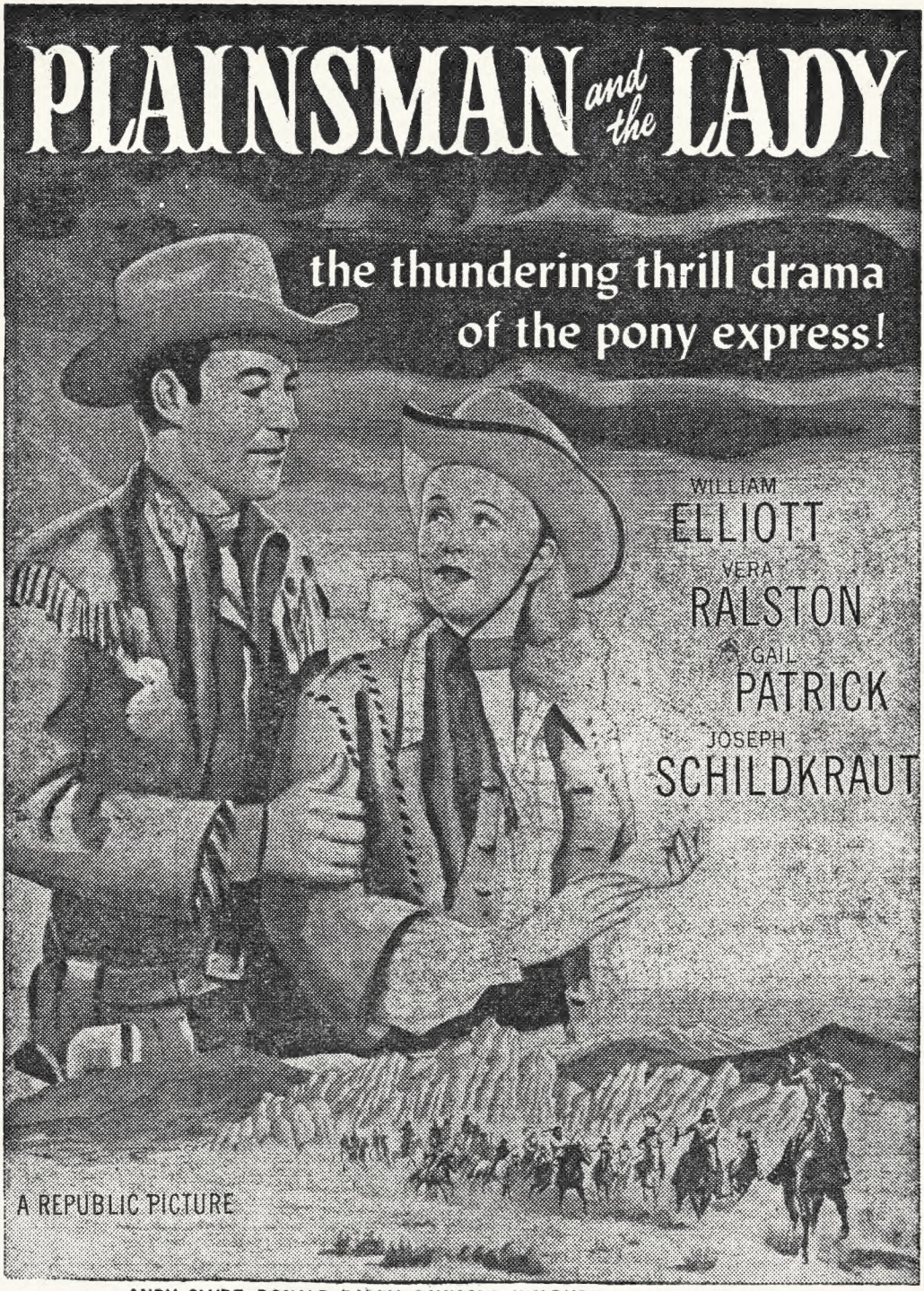

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As Blaster swept in pencil strokes, his jaw dropped and he stared

SILVER MOUNTAIN

By STEUART M. EMERY

It's a merry free-for-all in the mining town of Eureka when Dynamiter Blaster Breen joins forces with a Parisian barber to give some whiskery outlaw hombres a badly-needed trimming!

CHAPTER I

Just a Teeny Canary

THE blazing desert sunshine pouring through the window fell in a flood upon "Blaster" Breen, ace dynamite man at the Silver Princess Mine. It was hardly more blazing than the red flannel shirt which clothed the upper part of Blaster's recumbent form and in which he had gone to bed. The larger half of an oversize steak sandwich was clutched to his chest with one hand while the other, dangling floorward, brushed an empty bottle of the Mesquite Saloon's best tanglefoot.

Over Blaster's chest spread his wide orange-red beard, and his head was thatched deep with a similar fiery mop. He was a vast, rollicking hellion of a hard-rock man, huge-

A RIP-ROARING COMPLETE NOVEL

boned and huge-muscled, and in repose he was neither beautiful nor quiet. A grinding sawmill noise emerged from him steadily. Outside the window of the pine-walled room in the hotel the noises of Continental Street, Eureka's widest and toughest artery, went on but Blaster Breen remained dead to the world.

There was a flutter in the frame of the open window beside the bed and something feathered and yellow landed on the sill. It opened its tiny beak and the thin trilling of a canary filled the room. Blaster stirred slightly.

"G'way!" he muttered vaguely. "Take them mine whistles away!"

The canary ceased its song, bright eyes cocked at the bed directly beneath it. It launched itself forward and landed on Blaster Breen's chest, next the sandwich in his hand. Cautiously it waited, and as no move came from Blaster it grew bolder and pecked at the bread.

The bread, somewhat adamant as was the habit of Eureka's bakery products, appeared too big to break up under the tiny beak. Again the canary cocked its bright eyes and gently began to hop toward Blaster Breen's widespread beard in which nestled a multitude of crumbs.

It began to pick them off, the smallest ones first. Presently a larger and more succulent crumb attracted, and the little ball of fluff almost disappeared in the orange-red brush.

BLASTER BREEN suddenly opened one eye, then both, staring foggily at the ceiling. His gaze lowered, and a look of utter horror dawned on his crimson face. Eye to eye at a distance of six inches he and the canary stared at each other. Every muscle in Blaster Breen's huge frame stiffened, and he went paralyzed all over.

"Yaller buzzard!" he gasped. "A gigantic yaller buzzard is sinkin' its beak in my corpse! I have died in my sleep!" The canary, startled, hopped back again to the sandwich. "Now it's trampin' my chest in!" bellowed Blaster. "Stavin' my ribs!"

At the noise the canary took wing and came to rest on the back of a chair on which were draped a pair of corduroy pants with big-buckled suspenders. It opened its beak and began to trill again.

Blaster Breen flung himself to the floor, landing practically upright, and dived for the opposite window that gave onto Continental Street. His eyes were wild, his crumb-spattered beard wilder.

"I shall dive out the winder to safety!" he panted. "This time it is a yaller buzzard instead of a red-white-and-blue turkey with a straw hat on. It is the tremens."

Half-way to the window his eyes came into proper focus, and he blinked. The unwarranted motions of his limbs ceased and he brushed a hairy hand across a brow wet with perspiration.

"It is not a gigantic yaller buzzard," he announced. "It is a teeny canary. Blaster Breen, you what have lived the fearsome life of minin' town and desert are the equal of any canary that ever pounced upon a man's chest. Yuh little rascal, you!" He shook his finger rebukingly at the bird. "How in heck did yuh come to get in here? Answer me that, canary!"

There was no answer from the canary, but a light tap sounded on the door and Blaster jerked around.

"That is too gentle for the mighty hand of the law, or for an angry creditor," he mused. "Who is it?"

The light tap sounded again.

"Excuse me, pleeze, but ees my canary in zere?" asked a high voice.

"It be a lady's voice! And I am as pantless as Adam!"

A lady in the hotel! Frantically Blaster dived for the chair and crammed himself into his corduroys.

"Come in," he called. "Come in, ma'am."

The eyes of Blaster Breen started from his head. Across the threshold of his room stepped the most dapper, diminutive figure he had ever seen. A tight-waisted lavender frock coat with a skirt that flared like a sail, clothed it. Glistening patent leather shoes with pointed toes encased its feet, while a beautiful silk tile perched atop the head.

Merry, sparkling eyes smiled friendlily at Blaster. A handlebar mustache, raven black and gloriously waxed, curved in twin arcs up in front of round and rosy cheeks. The aroma of eau de cologne filled the room like a scented breeze.

"Bon jour, mon ami," rose the cheery salutation. The visitor executed a drawing room bow, heels together, and body snapping like a jack-knife. "Eet ees that I do not disturb, I 'ope. I perceive my leetle bird."

"I'll be a cryin' cougar!" breathed Blaster. "The desert has rained frogs! It is a Frenchman!"

Hippolyte whirled, blade ready, and lunged at Mark

"A Frenchman, *oui!*" The caller drew himself up to his full height of five-feet-two, lifting the tile. "A ceetizen of la Belle France come to make hees fortune on ze American frontier. Permit me, monsieur."

From his breast pocket he drew a card and Blaster took the pasteboard gingerly. Its ornate engraving read:

HIPPOLYTE PETITPOIS
Artist Tonsorial

Beard Styling and Care A Specialty	Late of Paris and Philadelphia

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Blaster's chest under its mat of orange-red hair, revealed by his open shirt, heaved slightly.

"I am Blaster Breen," he got out. "The dynamiter."

The canary gave vent to a cheerful twitter and came fluttering from the chair back to perch on its owner's shoulder.

"Naughtee, Clothilde!" said Hippolyte. "But papa forgives! Clothilde ees a friendly leetle bird, Monsieur Blastaire Breen, wiz ze bad habit of flying out ze window when I take her from her cage. But she does not evaire fly far."

The canary burst into a joyous trilling. Hippolyte lifted it from his shoulder and put it on the rickety stand near by. Deftly he plopped his silk hat over it.

"Zat ees enough of your disturbance of Monsieur Blastaire. *Taisez-vous.* Ze dark for you, Clothilde."

THE trilling ceased as night fell in the improvised silken cage. Blaster handed the card back.

"I am pleased ter welcome yuh to Eureka, Mussoo Pettipwah," he gulped. "Yuh've come to seek yore fortune? Yuh're follerin' the silver rush?"

"I follow ze beards," said Hippolyte. "Ze glorious beard rush! *Mon ami,* permit me to say zat you 'ave ze most *magnifique* red beard zat Hippolyte Petitpois, artist tonsorial, 'as evair viewed! Eet ees ze beard of Charlemagne, of ze great Barbarossa! Zere is pay ore in ze beard like zat, zere is pay ore in ze host of beards in Eureka for Hippolyte!"

"Well, now, I have got a pretty good beard," admitted Blaster, with becoming modesty. "But as for yore gettin' the trade of Eureka, that's somethin' else."

"In Paris ze high class artist tonsorial beezness eet deteriorate." A shade of sadness overspread Hippolyte's mercurial face. "Eeet is years since ze Empire of Napoleon ze Third fell. Ze *bourgeois* under ze *République* zey care nossing for ze elaborate styles of ze Imperial court and ze loving beard care and ze twice daily shaving. So Hippolyte is voyage to Philadelphia and in Philadelphia eet ees unsympathetic beezness also.

"And zen in your Harpair's Weekly I see ze peectures of ze mining rushes, ze boom-boom towns wiz t'ousands of ze miners wiz no shaves, no loving beard care. 'Zere,' says I to Hippolyte, 'is ze virgin territory.'

"Be'old, I arrive last afternoon and already I have bought ze just-vacant store three doors from ze post office in ze superb location and I have install' my feextures. Zere is ze fortune for Hippolyte at ze dollaire a beard, shave or trim, a dollaire ze shampoo, ze higher rates for ze special beard styling, and ze bathtub in ze back of ze shop."

"Our last two barbers didn't do so good, Mussoo Hippo," said Blaster. "The first of 'em went bankrupt for lack of customers."

"I shall advertise myself. *A bas* ze expense!"

"And the other he fled the town with a miner he nicked on the chin in hot pursuit, firin' at his heels."

"Hippolyte Petitpois has nevair nicked a customer on ze chin! Also, I, former Lieutenant Hippolyte Petitpois of ze Eighth Imperial Hussars in ze Franco-Prussian War, can defend myself. Look!"

He swept back the sail-like skirt disclosing a tooled leather sheath with a thin-bladed dagger in it.

"Ze steel! *L'arme blanche. Voyez vous,* I was at one time assistant to my elder brozzaire, Hyacinthe, ze greatest *maitre d'armes* in Paree. I can fence and thrust wiz zees like a rapier. I can also fight wiz ze saber as I did in ze Franco-Prussian war. Zis ees a fighting town? Very well, Hippolyte can fight w'en necessaire."

"Mussoo Hippo," said Blaster, "I foresee an interestin' career for yuh."

"And your career, Monsieur Blastaire? You are ze prospector, ze desert rat? You pursue ze silvair in ze ground where she ees for ze year after weary year?"

"I don't pursue no silver for year after weary year, wearin' out my boots and the best part of my life on no desert. I am goin' to let my silver strike find me like it has plenty of others. Silver is where yuh least

expect it, Mussoo Hippo. A man gets hisself drunk and stumbles and hits his head on a rock, and when he comes to the rock is free silver.

"A mule's trace can expose it on a trail, and has. Folks have found it diggin' an outhouse in their back yard or scoopin' out a shaller grave for their mother-in-law. No, sir, Blaster Breen is no Mahomet. He's goin' to make his silver mountain come to him. And latterly, Hippo,"—Blaster's eyes glinted —"I have been feelin' luckier and luckier."

"*Bon!* And in ze meantime w'ile you wait, Monsieur Blastaire, for your lucky strike?"

"I am a dynamiter, like I said, up to the Silver Princess Mine. It is high-paid work and steady work too. I am a expert dynamiter, Hippo," added Blaster with proper pride. "I can bring yuh down a whole ore chamber roof with my explosive, or I can fix it to bring down a few pounds light as feathers. I can put out a lighted match at ten paces and not hurt the match stick, if I feel like it."

"Superb, *mon ami* Blastaire!" exclaimed Hippolyte. "And now I go to my shop, ze *Maison* Petitpois. I plan ze grand opening for today. Zis formal garb, in which I parade ze boulevards of Paris, I save for ze occasion."

"I had better go with you, Hippo." Blaster surveyed the lavender-clad, silk-hatted glory of the strange Parisian figure. "This is a rough jokin' town. I am well-known and I'll pertect yuh. I'll take yuh for my little pardner, and whoever touches you, touches me. Wait, and I'll strap my gun on."

"Good, *mon camarade.* I put Clothilde back in her cage. Zen we parade ze boulevards of Eureka togezzaire."

CHAPTER II

The Chaparral Boys

BLASTER and Hippolyte walked downstairs through a stunned lobby and out into the brassy sunlight and alkali dust of Continental Street, running in a double rank of frame and adobe structures, with the barren mass of the silver range bulking hugely hardly a quarter of a mile from the buildings. The gusty life of a Frontier boom town roistered along the boardwalks, and ore wagons, spring carts, and freighters jumbled the street. An endless bedlam of voices hailed fellow townsmen or cursed at balky mules.

On the wooden sidewalk they marched along, the hulking figure of Blaster Breen looming over Hippolyte like a protective battleship. The lavender chest of Hippolyte Petitpois was distended with pride, he twirled his glistening handlebars with an air, the silk hat rode cockily on his head. The first roar of incredulity broke from a burly, plaid-shirted miner, and was echoed immediately.

"My goshamighty, what is it? Animal, mineral or vegetable?"

"Shoot it, Blaster, and stuff it!"

Flourishingly, Hippolyte doffed his silk hat.

"My fren's!" he caroled. "I sank you for ze welcome! Ah, but ze Frontier eet ees 'ospitable! I shall reciprocate!"

The crowd roiling along the arcades parted in amazement and the progress of Blaster and Hippolyte was triumphal, albeit accompanied by a steady chorus of owlhoots, catcalls, and Apache yells. Weathered faces were agape with grins, eyes bulged out under brows, mouths dropped open and then emitted raucous sound.

"Mussoo Hippo," said Blaster soberly, "yuh're knockin' 'em cold!"

A rapt look came into Hippolyte's cherubic face.

"Ze beards, ze glorious beards!" he murmured, as though fascinated. "Ze street eet ees flooded wiz zem. Wave upon wave like ze mighty sea of hair. Look *camarade,* ze mos' superb of all—four beards abreast marching upon us! Zey 'ave ze hair of ze hermit prophets!"

Blaster looked ahead. There was a clear space under the arcades for some twenty or thirty yards, and down it in a line that stretched from sidewalk edge to storefront stalked a quartet of figures side by side. They ranged in their alinement of height from short and fattish, medium and spare, up to the tall, big-shouldered man on the inside.

They were strangely and funereally alike in their low-crowned black hats, tightly buttoned black single-breasted jackets, and heavy, knee-high black boots that seemed some kind of uniform. From under the flat hats their faces stared, all of the same pattern in the vast bushy growth that burgeoned from their chins and ran over their mouths, up the sides of their faces to mingle with flowing, unkempt locks.

They had wild black hair through which eyes gleamed and faces were austere masks. Gun-belts weighted their hips, fastened outside their jackets.

"The Chaparral Boys in person!" gurgled Blaster. "Never have I seen no getup like that. They are walkin' thickets of assorted ages and sizes. Huh, Hippo?"

Hippolyte had plucked him by the arm, halting him.

"Be'old, my salon, Blastaire."

He darted across the sidewalk to the plate glass storefront. Through the pane the long mirror was revealed, the gleaming white enamel and metal barber's chair rose before it. Shaving mugs, brushes, lotions decorated the shelf beneath the mirror, crisp white towels hung on a rack.

"Eees it not beautiful—ees it not *magnifique*?" sang Hippolyte. "Eees it not—"

His chant of joy broke off. A rough shoulder crashed into him and knocked him off balance, a strong arm shoved brutally, and Hippolyte went over onto his back in the doorway.

"Ho, ho, ho!" came the snarl of laughter, and the line of black-clad and bearded men swept past. It was as though they had gone over Hippolyte in a wave.

"Hey, you!" roared Blaster. "Pick on somebody yore own size."

The four bearded faces turned as the somber men marched on in their odd formation. There was a vicious glint in the slate-gray eyes of the biggest man, the one who had deliberately jostled and knocked down the Frenchman.

"Come back here and I shall punch yore jaw for yuh! I'll plunge my right arm up to the elbow in that chin hair of yores!"

"Bah!" snarled the tall man, and the quartet marched on, high boots thumping in perfect step.

BLASTER'S great fists bunched and his eyes glared fury. He stepped swiftly across the planking and swung Hippolyte to his feet, beating the dust off the sail-like skirts of his lavender coat. Hippolyte Petitpois' eyes also flared, furious bubbling emerged from him.

"Sacré cochon! Sale maquereau! Nom d'un nom d'un nom, quel sauvage!"

"Keep it up," urged Blaster admiringly. "I don't know what yuh're termin' that big bully, but I'll back yuh to the limit, little pardner."

"I 'ave been insult! Mortally insult! I shall challenge!"

"He would eat you up, Hippo," said Blaster. "I'll attend to him the next time I see him, and to the rest of them Chaparral Boys. Mebbe he was just playin' a rough Frontier joke on yuh, knockin' yuh down like that."

Blaster Breen's desert-red forehead tied into the knots of thought as he ruminated.

"No, Hippo," he finally said, "somethin' tells me he done it deliberate and for some reason I can't figger out. I do my figgerin' better on a couple shots of redeye, and the best figgerin' place in town is right acrost the street. Mesquite Saloon, we greet yuh!"

Swaggering in good fellowship, Blaster grabbed Hippolyte Petitpois by the arm and rushed him over the sand. The batwing doors of the Mesquite swung violently open, and he pulled up short in front of the crowded room.

"Gentleman and others!" he bellowed. "Meet Mussoo Hippolyte Pettypwah of Paree and points west! Hippo, old *ami*, take yore bow!"

From faro, roulette and poker tables, and from the long, packed bar the Mesquite's customers stared at the diminutive resplendence of Hippolyte Petitpois. Every gaze in the place was focused on him. His hand went to the inside of his lavender frock coat and came out with a fat wallet. His fingers dipped into the wallet and a banknote rose on high. So did Hippolyte's voice in a clarion call.

"*Mes amis* of Eureka! 'Ere is ze 'undred-dollaire bill! To ze bar, all 'ands! Ze drinks zey are on Hippolyte Petitpois!"

Roaring, the crowd surged forward. Shouts of thanks and of thrist reverberated under the smoke-drifted rafters. The rush of parched customers swept dangerously close to Hippolyte, and Blaster gripped him about the waist. Up to the mahogany and all along it pressed the crowd.

"Yuh should give us some warnin', Hippo," said Blaster. "What yuh done is as dangerous as shoutin' fire in a crowded theayter."

Hippolyte did not answer him immediately. He was gazing at the bulletin board nailed to the post next which they stood. Printed notices and hand-scrawled advertisements, pictures, business cards, decorated it, some of them ancient and flyblown, others shiningly new.

"My card eet shall go 'ere," pronounced Hippolyte. "Ah, *mon ami*, Blastaire, what a

beautiful peecture of you! You are ze famous man!"

He put a finger on a dingy picture of a bearded and sombreroed individual who wore a wolfish air. Over it ran the smudgy caption:

$5,000 REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE

"That ain't me," said Blaster hurriedly. "It just looks somethin' like me. That is Old Bill Bodine, a tophand road agent. They ought to take that one down. He's been in Boot Hill over in the next territory a long time."

"And ze ozzaires?" Hippolyte's finger went over the array of visages, lowering and tough. "Zey are all clean-shaved! Zey would look so much bettaire wiz ze hair."

He pointed to another picture, which occupied a place of honor alone on the wall, a little distance away. It was that of a famous man whose beard was equally famous.

"Like zis," Hiyyolyte said. "Zis is noble beard."

"That's Gen'ral Grant," Blaster explained. "You know—won the Civil War and all. That's one of his sabers under it, they say. The boss of this here place is plumb proud of that sticker—keeps it sharp as a razor."

"Ah!" said Hippolyte, his eyes lighting up. "Like I use in Franco-Prussian War."

A hand suddenly jogged at Blaster's elbow and he turned, confronting a nondescript individual.

"H'lo, One-Gallus Benny," said Blaster.

"One-Gallus Benny," the grinning, gap-toothed swamper, whose baggy pants were held up precariously by a single suspender, bore two huge shots of red-eye on a tin tray.

"Bartender Splasher Simms he sent 'em to yuh special since Mussoo is buyin'. Grab 'em quick, Blaster. My pants is fallin' down."

INTO Blaster's throat went the gigantic drink. His eyes protruded and he waited for the explosion. It came.

"What did yuh say, Hippo, old benefactor? Beards on them faces? Yuh shall be obliged, Hippo. Yuh can have whatever yuh want in Eureka, at least till somebody else buys." From his hip pocket he wormed a stub of tally pencil. "Puttin' these on the faces of pitchers was my hobby when I was a angel child. I have done some mighty fine beard-drawin' in McGuffey's Third Reader and elsewhere. Watch!"

The heavy black lead traveled over visage after visage. Beards sprouted where none had grown before. Handlebar mustaches appeared on hairless lips. The features became unrecognizable under the welter of penciled growth.

"There! Now their own mothers wouldn't know em. These 'WANTED' gents do look better, don't they? Hippo, I could make a lot of money goin' for an artist."

"Yuh can pay a lot of money for goin' for an artist instead," said a drawling voice. "That'll cost yuh two hundred and fifty, Blaster."

United States Deputy Marshal John Pennypacker stood behind Blaster. A white sombrero topped his sun-and-sand-crimsoned face. A myriad crinkles nested around the eyes that looked lazy, but masked a fast mind. His slow motions, as all Eureka knew, did not mean he did not have a fast gun hand.

His eyebrows were bleached almost white by the desert sun, and a long, sickle mustache of the same blondish white swung down from his upper lip. With his longish jaw and startlingly contrasting coloration, he suggested a red and white pinto, and was referred to as such by many of his friends and admirers.

The usual wry and casual humor with which he handled the problems of Eureka threaded his tones.

"Hello, Marshal Penny, old paint-hoss!" Blaster hailed him fraternally. "Meet Mussoo Hippolyte Pettypwah of Paree, the professor of tonsorialism. Two hunnerd and fifty what are yuh talkin about?"

"Two hunnerd and fifty dollars, Blaster," drawled Marshal Penny. "That is the lawful fine for defacin' the property of the United States Government."

"I ain't goin' to pay no Government—"

"That's fifty dollars more for contempt of court, which I am holdin' right here," pronounced Marshal Penny. "Defyin' of yore Government in the presence of witnesses. Beware, Blaster, and snaffle yore tongue before I charge yuh with treason. Treason is hangrope."

An enthusiastic bellowing arose from the interested circle of onlookers.

"They're goin' to lynch Blaster Breeen! The Government is goin' to hang him from the rafters!"

"Let me pull on his legs! He's owed me ten bucks for the last six months."

Blaster's Adam's apple jerked up and down. He appeared on the verge of a seizure. A hand shot out and it held a fistful of bills.

" 'Ere ees ze money for my fren' Blastaire, *Monsieur le Maréchal,*" the cheery voice of Hippolyte Petitpois broke in. "Hees crime eet was commit' to oblige me. Be'old, Hippolyte Petitpois consider heemself responsible. I 'ave 'ad in my salon in Paree ze great honnaire of daily shaving ze great *Maréchal* Ducrot of ze French Army. May I 'ave ze honnaire of shaving daily ze great *Maréchal* Penny of ze United States Government?"

CHAPTER III

Hippolyte Challenges

MARSHAL PENNY blinked slightly, staring at the bills. He blinked even more on turning his gaze upon the glory of Hippolyte.

"Well, now I do like a good clean shave, Mr. Petitpois," he said. "Take yore money back and I'll suspend sentence upon Blaster Breen, the criminal here. I'll parole him in yore custody, Mr. Petitpois. See that he don't drink, smoke or gamble for the next thirty days, and that he is in bed prompt at seven o'clock every evenin'."

"Listen, yuh old pinto—" began Blaster.

"Stand away," said Marshal Penny firmly. "I have a new 'WANTED' ad to put up here and across the street at the post office."

He unfolded a big sheet and held it against the bulletin board. It showed the pictures of men, arranged in a row.

"Here are Mace Creede and his safe-smashin' gang, the cleverest and murderin'est post-office robbers west of the Mississippi, that have ten thousand simoleons on their heads. Names Cash Bradley, Stump Arnold and Hobe Platt.

"They caught 'em and give 'em life in the pen at Frisco, and now they've staged a jail-break and are loose again. Matter of fact, Mace Creede and his boys have been loose close to a year, but the Government is sometimes slow at gettin' out its warnin's except in the territories where the 'Wanteds' are supposed to be. They was last reported in hidin' out in South California, so the Government is notifyin' the Southwest now in case they head east depredatin' along the Border."

"Zey 'ave no beards," said Hippolyte. "Zey 'ave no character in zere faces. Also zey 'ave funny shape chins and 'eads shaved like zat."

"They are killers, Mr. Petitpois," said Marshal Penny. "They have plenty of character, but it is all bad hombre."

He turned on Blaster, just in time to catch the gleam in his eye.

"These ain't any flyblown oldies like yuh done yore defacement on Blaster, and yuh've put some wrong ideas into the heads of the jokin' customers. I'm not goin' to have this important one ruined up. On second thought, I'll put it up just at the post office which is not only the sacred territory of the United States Government, but don't sell drinks to make the spectators playful."

"Post-office robbers," snorted Blaster scornfully. "Stamp snatchers. Postcard an' blotter rustlers."

"Yuh'll be amazed at what is comin' into the postoffices by registered mail these days." Marshal Penny folded up the big circular. "Send a mine payroll through by Wells Fargo express, and if it is road agented, who follers up the robbery? The Wells Fargo express, that's all. Send the payroll cash by registered United States mail to the post office next the mine and if it is held up, who goes to work? Every blame marshal, deputy marshal, and United States officer from Washington to Walla Walla.

"The mines are gettin' smart. They are sendin' their cash by the registered mails in the U. S. sack instead of Wells Fargo express in the boot. If they lose it through road agents, they got thousands on the trail and on the watch-out for the agents, instead of a few express detectives. The U. S. Government never lets up on a postoffice haul. That's what the Government which yuh defame does, Blaster."

"Oh, yeah?" snorted Blaster. "Beneath the shield of every United States marshal beats a heart of gold an' deathless courage, I suppose yuh're tryin' to inform me. Well, let me inform you, Marshal Penny, that the less the Government meddles with the rights of private citizens, the better."

The marshal's fingers were exploring the upper pockets of his vest.

"Yuh're an anarchist, Blaster. Next thing yuh will be tellin' me that the United States Government will end up by taxin' the wages and income of its citizens. What, no seegars? I shall meander to the wooden Indian down

the street and get me a mouthful of same."

A sudden flurry of excitement broke out at the roulette table as the batwing doors swung behind Marshal Pennypacker, and the crowd stampeded joyously for it.

"There is a clear space at the bar, which is plumb unusual," said Blaster, mopping his brow. "Let's stake us a claim before it's jumped. I'm all wore out from argufyin' with that red-an'-white pinto, Penny."

BLASTER urged Hippolyte to the bar and banged his fist on it. "Splasher" Simms plowed forward, oozing his customary good nature and bar drippings. He was a portly, bay-windowed man in an apron that was permanently stained by beer and whisky. His hamlike, awkward hands, so Eureka claimed, spilled about half as much outside a glass as he put in.

"Two portions of red-eye an' a slab of information, Splasher," said Blaster. "D'yuh know four queer-lookin' gents, all in black, with beards and hair like grizzlies, who have just come to town? We met up with them and we don't like 'em."

"They are the Merridew Brothers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, readin' downward by their height," returned Splasher Simms.

He tilted out two shots of red-eye and made two pools on the mahogany in doing so.

"Lessee, now. They're openin' a hardware store down yonder across the street, and they are waitin' fer their stock to come in by the freighter. Been here a week, I reckon. They belong to some quaintsome kind of sect that forbids 'em to do all kinds of things, includin' drinkin' in public. So they buy enough licker here to float a ship and take it home and lap it up secret."

Splasher slapped the cork back into the bottle, promptly breaking it in half.

"That's a low habit," said Blaster scornfully, "but it's better'n not drinkin' at all."

"They are livin' in the store while they fix it up. If yuh ask me they are a set of ornery —Never mind. Here they come now for their night's supply."

Heavy boots clashed behind Blaster and Hippolyte. Four abreast once more, the bearded, black-garbed men advanced upon them and lined the mahogany. The biggest one, Matthew, brought up inches only from Hippolyte, his cold, slate-gray eyes staring with positive viciousness at him. His mouth opened, exposing yellowish teeth.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared. "Monkey! Make room for a man!"

He put his hand out. This time it did not shove Hippolyte off his feet. It came down in a hard slap on the top of his silk hat and drove it downward over his ears.

"Get, monkey!" he barked. "Climb yore stick outside!"

Hippolyte sprang backward a pace with amazing swiftness. His eyes flashed.

"*Monsieur!* You go too far!"

"Is that so?" sneered Matthew Merridew. The lowering faces of the four brothers bent on Hippolyte's diminutive form. "Bah!"

A jet of tobacco juice shot from Matthew's beard and struck squarely on Hippolyte's glistening patent leather shoe.

"You speet on my shoe!" cried Hippolyte. "*Monsieur*—take zat!"

He stepped forward and slapped the tall bearded man across the face. He danced back and his voice was high and courageous.

"I challenge! I geeve you my card!"

Matthew Merridew's hand went for the gun that hung in a holster attached to a swivel-bossed flap at his belt. The hands of the other

[*Turn page*]

brothers also dived for their Colts and they moved, ringing in Hippolyte. They acted with the precision of concerted, planned action, like a flawless team.

"Get him, boys!" snarled Matthew. "Get 'em both!"

Blaster's hand came up, fast and steady, and the gun in it roared flame. Through the flap with the swivel-boss that held Matthew Merridew's gun to his belt the slug tore, and the leather sliced apart. The bearded man's hand, driving down for gun butt, closed on empty air. Gun and scabbard, shot clean away from the belt, slammed on the floor.

Blaster whirled. Three guns were coming out on him at yards' distance. He saw the first one spring into Luke's hand, and Luke's face held murder. The bore jerked level, aimed at Blaster's stomach, and Luke's trigger finger tightened.

The form of Hippolyte, launched low, and extended like a fencer thrusting home, went forward and a shriek of agony ripped from Luke as his gun fell. Transfixed by the shining short steel of Hippolyte, Luke's hand poised in mid-air, the dagger dangling from it before it dropped to the floor.

HIPPOLYTE whipped around, and in a bound so swift his body was blurred, leaped across the short space to the wall, and tore from it the cherished sword of General Grant. Quicker than the eye could follow his movements he whirled, blade ready, and lunged with it to the throat of Mark, who was standing next to Luke. The point of the blade disappeared in the beard.

"Drop ze gun!" Hippolytes' voice was icy. "Or I do not just preeck ze skin!"

"And you drop yores, Brother John!" barked Blaster to the short, fat man. His Colt covered the last of the quartet. "Put yore hands up, every black-bearded son of yuh!"

The hands went ceilingward as the guns hit the floor. Glaring savagely, the four Merridew Brothers looked like trapped bears. Hippolyte stepped back, sliding his blade into the ornate sheath at his belt.

"*Sales bêtes,*" he said. "Somesing should be done to peoples like you."

"It is goin' to be done, Hippo, old *ami,*" remarked Blaster cheerfully. The spectators who had scattered as the guns came out now pressed forward, grinning expectantly. "I'm goin' to do it. Old Judge Blaster Breen is goin' to hold a little court right here. Just like that pinto, Marshal Penny, held his jackass court on me. These surroundin' gents can be the jury. I'm ruminatin' on the sentence I shall pernounce on these long-haired coyotes, and when I ruminate I get results."

His mouth opened in a roar.

"Ho, ho, ho, I have got it! For insultin', browbeatin', spittin' on the shoe of, and otherwise bein' guilty of impoliteness, molestatin', and attempted murder on a new feller cititzen, Mussoo Hippo Petitpwah, the famous Paree barber, I, Judge Blaster Breen, bein' of sound mind and body, do hereby sentence you four Chaparral Boys to have yore beards cut off and yore heads shaved by the aforesaid Musso Pettypwah in his tonsorial salon across the street pronto. And pay him ten bucks for the cost. Hey, jury of my peers, how is that for a sentence?"

"It be gigantical!" shouted a miner. "But yuh forgot the shampoo of their heads with tar."

"And use a cactus plant for a towel!"

"There, Chaparral Boys," said Blaster proudly. "The verdict is unanimous. We'll see what is under all them thickets—prob'ly mice. Yuh're condemned to the razor 'stead of the rope."

"Why, you—" A murderous light sprang into Matthew Merridew's eyes. "Yuh can't do no such thing!"

"Oh, I can't can't I? I'm the judge an' here is the jury. D'yuh want to fight it up to the United States Soopreme Court?"

Matthew's glance swung from side to side. The other Merridew brothers looked more than ever like cornered animals.

"Marshal Pennypacker," said Matthew, "we appeal to you!"

CHAPTER IV

Eureka's Transformation

THE marshal stood close by, a lighted cigar sticking out from under his drooping mustache. Two more cigars protruded from his vest pocket.

"I've pretty well gathered what happened," he drawled. "I got in on the tail end of it. This ain't no Government matter, you Merridews. This is Eureka's private justice. Ask me, I think yuh have it comin' to yuh. Yuh blame near committed murder. Go ahead and barber 'em up, Mr. Petitpois."

"No!" shouted Matthew Merridew. "No,

yuh cannot! Marshal, we four brothers are members of the House of Jericho, a sect which does not permit the cuttin' of human hair more than once a year, and that only when the hair and beard are of a certain manly length. In our Book it is written: 'The hair on the face and head of man is sacred. Had the All-Wise Providence intended it to be otherwise, lo, mortal man would be as hairless as the new-laid egg!'

"To desecrate our beards and hair, to shave us clean, would cast us out from our sect in shame. And we're the advance guard of our sect. The House of Jericho is plannin' to move from its homesteads in Pennsylvania to these fertile Western valleys. We would be pariahs, and our wives and children would shrink from us in loathin'."

"Oh, shucks," said Blaster disgustedly. "There goes a danged good decision up in smoke. Me, I'll reverse myself. A man's beliefs are his own, and mebbe I got some that are funny. In America we don't do anybody a damage because of his beliefs. Marshal Penny, we got to let 'em go."

"Right," the marshal declared.

Blaster pointed at the swinging door.

"Go, beards and long hair," he said grandiloquently. "Go and sin no more! In other words, pick up them fire irons off'n the floor and vamoose!"

The bearded men bent down and retrieved their weapons. They shoved them into their belts. In single file they stalked furiously through the batwings. The sound of their heavy boots on the wooden sidewalk faded out.

"And now, *mes amis*—" cried Hippolyte.

His voice was lost in the raucous din of unloosed cheering as Eureka took its newest citizen to its heart.

"Hooray for Mussoo Hippo, the little gamecock, and his toadsticker!"

"We have got the fightin'est Frenchman since Lafayette!"

"And the drink-buyin'est Frenchman!"

"Zhentlemen!" Somehow the voice of Hippolyte outrode the clamor. "I sank you! In five mineets across ze street I geeve ze grand opening of my salon tonsorial, *Maison* Petitpois! *Attendez!* I go!"

The crowd poured onto the sidewalk. Blaster watched the lavender frock coat plunge into the shop door. An instant only, it seemed, and a new Hippolyte stood framed in the doorway. His spotless white barber's jacket gleamed in the sunshine, a clean white linen cap was poised on his head. In one hand he brandished a china shaving mug, in the other a long-bladed pair of scissors. His voice rose.

"My fellow ceetizens of glorious Eureka! *Maison* Petitpois ees open for beezness. To ze first customaire to cross ze threshold I offer ze bottle of whiskee! *En avant, mes braves garçons!* I await ze great beard rush!"

Blaster's gaze swung to a few doors away. There in their usual line across the sidewalk in front of a shuttered building that bore the new sign "MERRIDEW BROS. HARDWARE", stood the four sinister black figures, one of them with a blood-stained handkerchief wound around his hand. Their hands were on their gun butts, but they did not move.

The cheering crowd went past Blaster and plunged forward for the door of *Maison* Petitpois.

"He has got the great beard rush," said Blaster. "It will be a wonder if he is not killed in it."

"Or," said Marshal Penny, standing at his side, "by somebody else. Name of Merridew."

But nothing of that was said to Hippolyte, to spoil his joy in his grand opening. That was just the beginning, however, for in the week and a half that passed swiftly, the *Maison* Petitpois easily became the center of attraction in Eureka. And Blaster accepted it as a personal triumph.

THERE came a day when, head up, and hob-nailed boots thudding briskly, Blaster Breen, swung along the sidewalk of Continental Street, headed for *Maison* Petitpois. Jovially he shouldered his way through the stream of citizens that eddied along the arcades. But it was a different citizenry from that of ten days ago. Blaster stared at faces that were familiar but strangely new, for the old countenances that he had known had undergone a transformation by the scores.

The bristling hirsute growths were gone. In their place reigned neatly-trimmed Vandykes, luxuriously curled Burnsides, Napoleon III goatees and imperials, magnificent handlebars, beards that resembled those of General Ulysses S. Grant and General Robert E. Lee.

Visages that had been hidden for years were suddenly bared to view. A strange aroma of *eau de cologne,* witch-hazel, and hair lotion fought with the odor of red-eye, tobacco smoke and perspiration that ema-

nated from the batwing doors.

"All Eureka is stormin' the doors of *Maison* Petitpois," thought Blaster, grinning. He waved cheerily to a broad-chested fellow miner whose one-time tangled thicket had become a lustrous, square-cut spade beard. "Howdy, Nebuchadnezzar."

"I didn't buy me no Nebuchadnezzar," called the spade-bearded one. "That one would be waved and anointed and would cost five bucks. I bought me the Assyrian Monarch for two and a half."

Blaster dodged a set of New England jowl chin whiskers and a Spanish Grandee V-trim and brought up in front of *Maison* Petitpois. His eyes bulged.

"What's goin' on?" he inquired. "I've been blastin' and bangin' away at the mines all day."

Against the front of *Maison* Petitpois stretched a long, somewhat ancient leather settee. Before the settee on the wooden sidewalk were placed small brightly painted tables and on the tables rested miniature coffee cups. Aged copies of *Harper's Weekly* and *Leslie's Weekly* were clutched in the hands of freshly barbered and lotioned citizens.

One hulking ore-wagon driver, with corrugated brow, was conning the pages of a six-months-old illustrated copy of Paris *Figaro*. In boxes along the rim of the sidewalk four-foot cactus plants reared by way of urban greenery.

"Yuh ask what's goin' on, Blaster?" inquired the student of Paris *Figaro*. "Mussoo Hippo he has put his booleyvard caffay and library in for his regular customers. He says he always had one in Paree and he served his regulars—dukes, and generals and such—demmytasseys with coneyack in 'em after their operations had been performed. These here are demmytasseys." Carefully he lifted the tiny coffee cup. "Demmytasseys with tanglefoot. Mussoo Hippo is aimin' to bring the refined art of grashus Paree livin' to the American Frontier, he says."

"He has brung it," said Blaster. "He has got me takin' my Saturday night bath on Wednesday also. I am goin' to waller me in his tank and get three days' ore chamber grit out of my pores."

He moved on inside. The vivid colors of a desert sunset splashed into the barber shop. Bright chintz curtains hung across the front window, in her wicker cage Clothilde raised a trilling song. Already individual shaving mugs with names on them lined the shelf and on one was painted the American flag with the legend:

By Special Appointment to
Marshal Pennypacker,
and the United States
Government

A customer reposed in the shining barber's chair and behind him Hippolyte hovered.

"Allo, Blastaire!" he hailed joyously. "Zis ees my last customaire before I close and take ze 'oliday for tonight. Go 'ave ze bath and I am weeth you *toute de suite.*"

"All right, Hippo," said Blaster, and passed through the first partition.

Here was the pine-walled bedroom of Hippolyte Petitpois, immaculately neat and tidy. Curtains made a closet on the walls, a small cot crowded one wall and over it hung a framed and faded picture of an opaque-eyed gentleman with a mustache and imperial, clad in a French marshal's uniform and gold-braided *képi*. It bore the lettering:

Napoleon III, Impérateur de France

Under it hung a saber and a cavalry pistol, the relics of Hussar Lieutenant Hippolyte Petitpois.

BLASTER went on into the next compartment of the long store building and brought up against the big galvanized iron tub. Two boilers full of water stood in the corner, a smaller boiler simmered on the stove.

The back door of the building, giving practically onto the tub, was open and through it Blaster took in a vista of sand, running to the lip of an arroyo two hundred yards away. Beyond stretched the limitless expanse of desert, cactus-dotted and mesquite-patched, and in the far distance rose the blue blur of mountains.

One after the other Blaster's mine-stained garments hit the floor. He wrenched up a boiler of water and sloshed it into the tub. From the stove he threw in half the simmering water and plunged hip deep in the tank, clutching a huge bar of bright yellow soap.

"Now if I had a sailboat to push around with my feet or a wood duck I'd be back in my happy childhood days," he murmured, and grinned.

Lathered from head to midriff with the

strong soap, he thrashed and wallowed, then stretched his huge, hair-matted frame out at full length in the tepid luxury, closing his eyes.

"Be'old, Blastaire, I am 'ere," came the voice of Hippolyte Petitpois. "Wiz ze superb sairvice for my *ancien camarade.* Ze warm tanglefoot in ze warm stomach in ze warm bath, w'at is more gracious leeving?"

Blaster's groping hand caught a towel and he rubbed the soap out of his eyes. Hippolyte, smiling cherubically, stood beside the iron tub, holding out a double shot of red-eye on a tray. He executed his jack-knife drawing room bow.

"The art of grashus livin' all right," said Blaster.

He slapped the wet towel on the tub's edge by the door. Out across the sand on the arroyo rim something stirred. It was like a shrub or a dark bush, moved by a vagrant wind. But the thin, tiny tube that projected over the arroyo's lip did not look like a branch from a bush.

It glinted in the sun, and a jet, two jets of smoke, leaped from it. Screaming, the bullets tore through the open door and passed inches only over Hippolyte's low bending body. They passed through the bedroom and the barber shop, and glass splintered in the window on the street.

"Hippo, hit the floor!" shouted Blaster and, gripping his arm, pulled him.

Blaster went down in the tub like a duck diving for the bottom. The gunfire lowered instantly and shot after shot thudded into the heavy iron side of the tub. Then there was silence.

"I counted 'em," choked Blaster. "His magazine's empty!"

CHAPTER V

It Pays to Be Polite

HAULING himself, naked and sputtering, over the end of the tub out of sight of the door, Blaster glued his eye to a knothole in the back wall. No black spot or bush, no glistening tube showed any longer over the arroyo's rim. Cautiously Blaster reached out an arm, got the handle of the door, and slammed it.

"He's gone, Hippo," he said. "Gone but shore not forgot. If yuh hadn't made yore famous drawin' room bow, yuh'd have had two slugs through yore chest. It pays to be polite."

Hippolyte had come up from the floor and the protection of the tub. His eyes flashed fire.

"Rascal! *Franc tireur!* And who—"

"I seen a black spot movin' at the arroyo," said Blaster, "but it wasn't no bush like I thought at first. It was one of them low-crowned black hats or a black beard. It was one of the Chaparral Boys, them unmerry Merridew Brothers that lives three-four stores from this one. Hippo, with this back door open anybody could draw a bead on yuh clean through this buildin' from the arroyo, and gun yuh while yuh was breathin' down the neck of a customer. That gent wanted yuh."

Blaster was toweling his hairy frame vigorously, blowing out his cheeks in honest indignation. He pointed to the flattened bullets that had hit the tub and fallen on the floor.

"He wanted me, too, for a side dish. Yuh'd better keep this back door shut and do your sleepin' up at the hotel along with me till we get on some kind of a workin' basis with these Chaparral Boys. It's their second try for us."

"I am not afraid of zem," said Hippolyte defiantly.

"Yuh can be too cussed fearless in Eureka. Boot Hill is full of fearless folks. Mebbe we stirred them House of Jericho prophets up too much when we humiliated 'em. That kind figger they can wipe out a humiliation only with a killin', and the Book of Jericho may have a ban on the cuttin' down o' beards but it don't seem to have one on the cuttin' down of yore feller neighbor."

He crammed his clothes on and led the way to the front of the store.

"We got us a problem to figger out," he said then. " I ain't goin' to bring no Marshal Pennypacker into it till we've collected us some evidence. Matter of fact, Marshal Penny he suspects them Chaparral Boys mean to mow yuh.

"I am ruminatin', and I am cogitatin' my thoughts, Hippo. I'm goin' back to the hotel and sleep me a nap for a few hours to clear the mind. I was blastin' for twelve hours today, and last night I was up all night drawin' to inside straights. Where do I find yuh when I get up refreshed?"

"I shall be at ze Mesquite. Zere ees a gam-

bler zere from New Orleans wiz whom I play ze piquet and discuss intelligently ze French cooking."

Blaster shoved through the front door and found his path obstructed by half a dozen curious citizens standing in front of the plate glass window. Two bullets had torn clear through it leaving neat, starred punctures.

"Who done that, Blaster?" demanded one of the onlookers.

"Hippo's canary. It pecked too hard."

Blaster elbowed on his way. He came onto the sidewalk of the post office, three doors from *Maison* Petitpois and again found his path blocked. A score or more of Eureka's idle stood around, loafing and commenting.

"Here she comes!" yelled a voice. "Rollin' in on the minute with ole Leatherface Hanks at the ribbons and Bangaway Jake Rudd ridin' shotgun!"

Down the street toward the post office swept the stage with its four horses straining gallantly in their collars. A spectator shoved his head in the post office door.

"Hey, Post-office Pete, come a-runnin'! Stage is in!"

AT the call, a lathlike, stoop-shouldered clerk in a baize apron and an eyeshade appeared on the porch. The stage pulled up in front of the post office with a shriek of brakes and the thud of halted hoofs. "Leatherface" Hanks, the dusty and gnomelike driver, leaned out from his perch, shoving the whip back into its socket.

"Hiya, Post-office Pete!" he yelled. "United States mails! Brung in agin all obstacles includin' yore dumb clerk what kept us waitin' half an hour at Mesa City. Sling 'em off, Bangaway!"

"Bangaway Jake" Rudd, the big shotgun guard, reached down and his brawny arm hurled a sack onto the sand.

"There's yore ordinary mails, Post-office Pete!" roared Bangaway Jake. "They are the usual load of overdue bills for Eureka's citizens, and the letters from their wives askin' 'em when in blazes they are goin' to make their lucky strike and come home to the farms and families they deserted in Ohio and Illinoy. Leave 'em lay. Here comes the registered."

He lifted a plethoric sack and it hit the street.

"Look at the overstuffed baby! Ninety thousand bucks in cash packages in that there sack, said yore stamp-lickin' clerk at Mesa City. Hooray for pay day at the mines! Sign for the ninety thousand beauty, Mr. Post-office Pete."

The thinnish clerk scribbled on his form pad and passed the receipts up. Through the gaping crowd of spectators he carried the registered mail sack on his shoulder into the building.

"Ninety thousand bucks in that there sack!" bellowed Blaster. "Look out yuh don't break yore back, Post-office Pete, with that load of lucre. And look out the big, bad bogeymen don't get it while yore attention is on readin' our postcards."

Guffawing, he strode through the spectators and came up alongside a tall figure in black. Matthew Merridew stood beside the corner stanchion of the post office awning. Blaster's gaze traveled challengingly over him from bearded face to boots and back again. The cold, slate-gray eyes were unreadable.

"Huh!" he told himself, pushing on. He had seen the cactus spikes sticking out from the lower part of Matthew Merridew's heavy black boots. "I had about expected it would be Brother Matthew. There's no cactus on Continental Street, but there's plenty in that arroyo. . . ."

Back at the hotel, after his nap, Blaster Breen brushed a hairy hand over his orange-red thatch and ran it through his beard, wringing off the last drops of the basin of water into which he had dunked his head. Revivified, rollicking, and with the last remnants of sleep out of his system he left his room and once more marched along the arcades.

It was well past midnight and on this side of Continental Street, devoted entirely to daytime business, there was hardly a passerby. He passed the darkened fronts of stores and came up to the post office.

"Halt!" croaked a voice. A shadowy, lean figure rose seemingly from nowhere and it held a Winchester. "Who goes there? Friend or enemy? Advance and give the— Oh, shucks, it is nobody but Blaster Breen!"

"Hello, Pop Dorgan," said Blaster, raising his voice in the manner of one addressing the hard of hearing.

He stared at the thin old man, with the flat Stetson, who had risen from the chair on which he had been sitting, tilted against the post office wall. His muscles jerked in surprise. From the ancient guard's cheeks swayed a set of perfect weeper whiskers, and

a flowing waterfall mustache joined them together.

"What have yuh done to yoreself, for cryin' cougar's sake! What in blazes are them things where yore tobacco-stained, rat-tail beard used to hang respectably?"

"These are what Mussoo Hippo calls Lord Dundreary lambrequins, a four-dollar special," said "Pop" Dorgan proudly, pulling at the left-hand drape. "Takes twenty years off'n my features, says my wife, and makes me resemble a dook. Me, I have come out of my retirement to be a special post office guard, and in the name of the United States Government I challenge every suspicious passerby."

"You a special post office guard? Is the Government gone loco?"

"I can shoot, and I am plumb trustworthy, Blaster, despite my slight deefness and the ailments of advancin' years. Five bucks a night I get when there is huge lucre in the post office safe, like tonight. And I can set in a chair while I do my post office guardin'. So my rheumatics I got at Lookout Mountain don't matter, though the colic misery is still bad. Ouch, there it comes again!"

HE PUT his hand to his midriff, grimacing. "Five-six hours more I got to set here till dawn and Post-office Pete come. I reckon I'll just have to grin and bear it, but if I could only get across the street to the Mesquite once or twice and put a warmin' remedy inside me I'd be able to forget the pain."

"Hand me yore rifle," said Blaster. "And run across and swaller the red-eye yuh hanker fer. I've been a sojer, Pop, so I can do special post office guard as good as you. The United States Government has got no right to insist yuh suffer so. Go get yore stummick and thirst remedy while I pertect the ninety thousand simoleons."

"It's in the safe, Blaster," said Pop. "The safe is behind the counter so's yuh can't see it through the winder. There ain't no back door—jest this one, and it's padlocked. You keep the post office while I go for my cure, and I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Two shakes of red-eye, three mebbe, yuh'll be back in," soliloquized Blaster as Pop Dorgan shambled rapidly for the lighted front of the Mesquite.

He swung the rifle expertly to his shoulder, cocked his cigar in the corner of his mouth and began to perambulate briskly up and down in front of the post office window.

"To walk my post in a military manner, takin' notice of everything that goes on within sight and hearin'. General Orders. What is this?"

He stopped in front of the bulletin board, by the side of the padlocked front door. The faces of four clean-shaven individuals stared at him from the big poster with "WANTED FOR POST OFFICE ROBBERIES" above it. The faces were malign and hard.

"Tough hombres, huh," remarked Blaster. "This was the poster that Marshal Penny wouldn't put up in the Mesquite for fear of gettin' it defaced. Well, there ain't no Marshal Penny lurkin' behind my back now, and these faces can stand plenty of improvement. Let's see how they'll look with dook's lambrequin's exactly like Pop's. It will be a tasty way to amuse myself while waitin'."

CHAPTER VI

Brother Business

OUT came Blaster's tally pencil, and the Dundreary weepers and waterfall mustaches commenced to sprout on visage after visage.

"Now for some flat hats like Pop's, and he will have a conniption fit to go along with his colic when he sees this."

The hats went on. Blaster stepped back and, grinning, surveyed his handiwork.

"No," he opined critically, "I done a poor job on these two outside lambrequins. I'll fill 'em in for real bushes." Rapidly he swept in the strokes. "There! They're quite different post-office robbers. They are—"

His jaw dropped and he stared at the bushy-bearded pair with the flat black hats. His hand shook as he turned the two remaining lambrequins into full thickets.

"They're the Chaparral Boys! They're the House of Jericho! The Merridew Brothers are the Mace Creede post-office gang with hair!"

His eyes glinted with inspiration. Reaching up he tore the poster away from its tacks, folded it and thrust it into his shirt. He could see Pop Dorgan pushing out from the batwing doors of the Mesquite and coming back.

"Here yuh are, Pop," he said, turning over the rifle. "I hope yuh won't run into any-

thing worse'n colic tonight. I'm off for elsewhere."

The old man settled back into his chair as Blaster galloped for the Mesquite. He charged into the place like a stampeded steer. Hippolyte Petitpois, resplendent in his lavender suit, sat at a table by the wall in excited triumph over a pallid-faced gambler. He was scooping in the last trick.

"Game!" he exulted. "Zat ees ze third game in succession I have won from you, my New Orleans *ami!* Ah, Hippolyte Petitpois, he has learn' hees piquet in ze boulevard cafés of Paree. Ze piquet of New Orleans eet ees not ze piquet of Paree."

"Hippo, yuh're a wizard." The pale-faced gambler smiled and tossed a ten-dollar bill toward him.

"Ah, my fren' Blastaire," greeted Hippo. "Watch me deal."

"No deal," snapped Blaster. "Out of here. Over to yore shop."

Blaster seized Hippolyte firmly by the collar of his lavender frock coat and lifted him to his feet. He rushed him, volubly protesting, out the door and across the street.

"W'at ze thundaire ees all zis about, Blastaire?" inquired Hippolyte, once inside *Maison* Petitpois. "Be'old I am in ze run of fortune at ze cards and you 'ave cost me much money."

"I have made yuh much money," said Blaster excitedly. "Money for both of us. We are pardners in this." He pulled out the circular. "It looks like my lucky strike has found me at last. Look at this, Hippo! Are they or are they not our bullyin', bushwhackin' friends, the Chaparral Boys?"

Hippolyte's eyebrows arched in amazement. His gaze turned from the pictures with the penciled beards and low-crowned hats to the text.

"Eet ees our fren's, Blastaire! See you, ze descriptions, ze height, ze hair! Two of zem light hair. Ze beard of zat Luke I poke my blade into was dyed, I could see zat at close range. Ze beard and hair of ze beeg bully, Matthew, eet ees also dyed. In ze sunshine on ze street w'en he pass zis *maison* eet has ze purple accent. Ze noses, ze set of ze eyes, I cannot be mistake' in zese men. As ze barber I know ze physiognomy!"

"Smart hombres!" growled Blaster. "They hid out in some hole-in-the-wall for nigh a year after their jailbreak, growin' the disguise. That House of Jericho uniform, that marchin' in formation, that brother business —that's plumb smart, too. 'Course, they didn't dare have yuh shave 'em and bring their real faces an' heads out. They made 'em a character as crackbrains, and nobody questions what a crackbrain does. It lets 'em into a town with a post office without no suspicions and, Hippo, this town has got a post office and right now that post office has got ninety thousand dollars in its tin can safe. Get the idea?"

"Zey know of ze large money what comes now by ze mails? Zey will attack ze Eureka post office, Blastaire?"

"They didn't come here to sell hardware, Hippo. That is another good blind that lets 'em rent a store for livin' quarters near the post office. They want you out of the way, Hippo, because they got to pass yore shop to get to the post office and barbers is up till all hours. Right now, guardin' that ninety thousand bucks is nobody but old Pop Dorgan, and they can overwhelm him in fifteen seconds. That big hunk Matthew, who is Mace Creede, saw that ninety thousand come in, and heard all about it. They'll hit that post office tonight, Hippo, cause tomorrer that payroll will be gone."

"Ah!" breathed Hippolyte. "We shall expose zem to ze great Marshal Pennypacker!"

"We'll expose nobody, and have that pinto Marshal Penny and his posse cut in on the reward. I told yuh this was my lucky strike, Hippo, and that it's big money for us both. We'll capture the Chaparral Boys and collect the reward single-handed. We both got guns. Ten thousand bucks to split between us, Hippo!"

"Ten thousand dollaires!"

"Set down and plan this out regular." Blaster swiveled the barber's chair around and seated himself in as though it were a throne. "Old General Blaster Breen will now go into his cogitatin' and his ruminatin'."

"Proceed, Blastaire," urged Hippolyte. "I am all ears."

FROM his coat pocket he drew something wrapped in paper, and reaching up into the darkened cage of Clothilde drew out the canary and set it on the floor.

"Ze cake I buy for Clothilde. She shall 'ave her dinnaire while we converse."

The canary hopped lightly about the board floor, pecking at the broken bits of cake that Hippolyte tossed down.

"Turn the lamp down, Hippo. We'll put it out presently, and go into ambush here in the

dark back of yore door, waitin' for the Chaparral Boys to pass. Then we creep out and we've got 'em cold between our six-guns and old Pop's Winchester before they even reach the post office. We—"

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Hippolyte. "Clothilde! Clothilde!"

On the edge of a large knothole poised a choice bit of cake. Clothilde's hearty peck sent it dropping through. Fluttering her wings, then folding them tightly, Clothilde thrust herself through the knothole and disappeared from view in pursuit.

"She has flown through ze knothole!" wailed Hippolyte. "She has gone under ze floor! She ees imprison'!"

"She is doggone well imprisoned," said Blaster. "The sand has drifted up clear to the floor around these building's. Yuh got a clawhammer handy, Hippo? We'll have to take up the floorboards to rescue Clothilde."

A faint, frightened cheeping arose.

"I get ze tools. Have courage, Clothilde!"

Hippolyte darted into the rear of the shop. He was back, flushed with excitement, bearing a hammer and a crowbar.

"Rescue ees coming, Clothilde!" He thrust the end of the crowbar under the wide, short plank and heaved. Up came the plank, torn from its ancient fastening, and a feathered ball of yellow soared into the room.

"Ah, Clothilde! You are save'!"

Blaster Breen stared down from the vantage of the barber's chair at what the upheaved plank revealed.

"Great cryin' cougars!" he gasped.

He sprang from the chair and seized the lamp from the wall, thrusting it down into the aperture. A wide and deep trench yawned under the flooring of *Maison* Petitpois. It ran parallel to the street and Blaster thrust his head far down into it, staring eastward. A dim light some distance off in the trench appeared, and the muffled sound of voices traveled to him. Blaster's face was wet with sweat as he pulled himself back onto the floor.

"Wait for 'em behind yore door, huh?" he said huskily. "Hippo, they're under the post office already! The Mace Creede Chaparral Boys have dug a tunnel clear through from their store to the post office! No wonder they meant to bully yuh and menace yuh clear out of town at first sight, or bushwhack yuh this afternoon. Yuh've been livin' and workin' for ten days over the tunnel they been drivin'. Drivin' for ninety thousand bucks at the end of their rainbow."

"Mon Dieu! Zey weel walk off weeth ninety thousand dollaires!"

"They will not!" A grim look hardened Blaster's big face. "Hippo, you and I have got 'em boxed. We've got that there ten thousand reward in the hollow of our hands. I can feel my share bulgin' my hip pocket already, or mebbe goin' down my throat at the Mesquite. Them Chaparral Boys are down there at the end of this tunnel. We go down the tunnel and take 'em unawares. Get yore gun, Hippo, little pardner. We're goin' to crawl."

"Ah!" jubilated Hippolyte. "Eet ees ze great adventure!"

He was back from the bedroom, his big cavalry pistol in his hand, as Blaster wrenched up a second plank to let his big body through. Softly Blaster dropped into the tunnel and Hippolyte hit its bottom beside him. Blaster lifted the uptorn planks back into place and utter darkness engulfed them.

THE faint glow ahead still came from down the trench. Blaster went forward on his hands and knees. The trench was roomy, built so that a crawling man could make fast progress, and in the soft sand all movement was soundless.

"Only two stores to go and then the post office," whispered Blaster. "Here's the next store." He raised his hand and it struck something that was heavy but yielding. "They do things to the last detail, them Chaparral Boys. This is a screen of cloth covered with sand and put over the foot or so of space between the buildin's so's no trench can show from the street. Forward the Light Brigade!"

"Ze Old Guard dies, but he nevair surrenders!" whispered Hippo.

The tunnel made a turn around a shelf of rock and straightened out again. It was yards only now from the post office, and ahead a wall of black loomed across it. The sound of voices had ceased, but there were other sounds that Blaster could not make out. On he crawled and his hand came up against the huge boulder buried in the sand around which the tunnel curved.

He wormed his body around the rock and stared down. He was looking into a big pit, dug out of the hard-packed desert sand and in the pit worked three bearded figures. They moved fast and expertly.

"Gosh!" breathed Blaster as Hippolyte's slight form came abreast of him. "These shore are perfessionals! I'll be a cryin' cougar if they ain't made themselves a perfect ore chamber! Look at the shorin' and the sett!"

CHAPTER VII

Bull's-Eye

IN THE light of a lantern the Brothers Luke and John stood on a portable platform, their heads almost touching the post office floor. They were screwing crosspieces onto the planks where the joists had been cut away.

The burly Matthew sawed steadily with an inch-wide steel through the soft pine boards. Hinges were screwed into the flooring and the outline of the trap-door was coming into completion. Balks of timber shored it, and a plan of the post office was tacked on one of them.

There was not a word among the sweating workers, and saw and screwdriver went with absolute teamwork. All three men had their guns on.

"Get it?" muttered Blaster. "They've got the post office safe settin' right atop the trap-door they made out of the floor under it. Knock them shorin's away and—*plop!*—without no sound the safe will fall through the trap onto the sand. It's a pleasure to watch real safe-robbin' experts at work."

"Ready?" said Matthew in a low voice. "Ready, Stump and Hobe?"

"All right, Mace," said Luke.

The three men leaped from the sett and lifted the light framework to the side of the pit. The pseudo Matthew Merridew stood in the center of the pit with a sledge in his hand, its head muffled with cloth.

"Ze fourth brozzaire, Mark, w'ere ees he?" whispered Hippolyte.

"Standin' lookout on the store or out back holdin' the hosses in the arroyo," answered Blaster. "Here comes the safe, Hippo. The minute she hits the sand, we out with our cannon and paralyze the Mace Creede Chaparral Boys."

Matthew swept the sledge back over his brawny shoulder, it swung forward, and the shoring balks spun away under its impact. Down from the flooring of the post office swung the trap, a square black metal object plunged through it and hit the bottom of the pit. It stood upright, carried straight down by its weight. Luke jumped forward, tilted a shoring balk back under the swinging trap and thrust it upward, closing the flooring and bracing it.

"Beautiful!" murmured Blaster. "No more sound than yore canary landin' on its feet, Hippo. If Pop Dorgan peeks through the winder, he can't even see the safe is gone underground. Since he's about half-deaf and prob'ly snoozin', his ears won't do him any good."

The fattish John jumped forward, unrolling a leather kit. From it he took a wedge, thin as paper, and drove it into the door crack of the safe above the lock with a small, muffled hammer. A second larger wedge followed, and a third. A fourth went in and Matthew stepped up with the sledge. Luke stood by, holding an open cigar box.

"Draw," whispered Blaster. "We've got 'em crimson-handed!"

A gasp of horror broke from him as his hand, reaching for his scabbard, met only emptiness.

"My six-gun! Gone! It has joggled out of the holster somewheres while I was hands and kneein' it! Hippo, cock yore artillery and pass it to me."

"I can't pass eet to you," came Hippolyte's voice, "but I cannot cock eet, Blastaire. I 'ave forgot to clean eet zees many months. Ze 'ammaire—you try."

Blaster felt the gun shoved into his hand and savagely he, too, tried to bring the hammer back. The rusted mechanism would not move.

"No good!" he groaned. "We got to crawl back and give a general alarm!"

In the pit Matthew's muffled sledge struck with terrific force on the wedge and the crack in the safe widened.

"We've got her, boys!" he muttered hoarsely. "Get another wedge in, Stump. Two, three more swipes does it. Hobe, you shelve that box. We don't need the stuff. The wedges are crackin' this tinpot wide."

The pseudo Luke moved so quickly that Blaster had no time to duck back. Luke's hands, rising over the tunnel rim, set the open cigar box on the sand almost under Blaster's nose. His eyes, peering from amid his mat of hair, stared straight into those of Blaster. His mouth opened.

Furiously Blaster struck with the barrel of

Hippolyte's pistol, taking Luke on the top of the head. The robber went down in a heap on the bottom of the pit. As Blaster struck there was the heavy thud of the sledge and a crackling, rending sound. The wrecked safe door gaped, cleanly sprung.

"Open!" exulted Matthew. "And here's the loot! What the—Hobe!"

"Back!" rasped Blaster. "Back, Hippo, for yore life!"

MATTHEW'S gaze, swerving up, caught the two faces looking down. The sledge went into the pit wall, his hand flashed to his belt.

"Breen and that cussed Frenchie! Get 'em, boys!"

Blaster reached out and grabbed at the wooden object in front of him. He got himself around and, crushing together, he and Hippolyte squirmed the few yards to the cover of the rock. They crouched there, pressed together in the dark. Blaster was hugging the cigar box to his chest.

"Shove that cash in the bag," came Matthew's harsh voice from the pit, out of Blaster's sight. "Then get Hobe Platt on his feet. He's comin' to. You, up there behind that rock, come out with yore hands up! Yuh haven't got guns or yuh'd have fired long ago."

"Like blazes we will!" roared Blaster. "I'm goin' to yell for the guard! I'm goin' to yell bloody murder! Yuh may have us boxed, but so have we got you boxed."

"Yell away!" snarled Matthew. "We'll be out of here before that old fool guard can do a blame thing. You've got us boxed, have yuh?" The clear, carrying hoot of an owl rose from the pit and traveled under the flooring. "Lissen to that!"

From Blaster's rear instantly sounded an answering hoot.

"Our other pardner, Cash Bradley, is comin' after yuh, Breen. That's a call to come in a hurry. And he's got a double-barreled sawed-off. When that goes off we go clear through the tunnel and away."

Blaster stared back down the tunnel in the direction of Hippolyte's shop and the Merridew Brothers' store. Light wavered under the floors of the buildings, a light that grew clearer, jumping up and down.

"He has got us, Hippo!" Blaster panted. "That's the missin' Mark, the guard at their store, crawlin' down on us with a sawed-off and a bull's-eye lantern hung round his neck. Soon as he rounds that rock yonder we're blowed to ribbons. And the merry Merridews make their getaway."

"*Non!*" said Hippolyte calmly, "*Non!* Ze missing Mark he mus' come round ze rock. I go to meet heem."

"Yuh're goin' to take on a man with a sawed-off shotgun?" breathed Blaster. "In a tunnel? With yore bare hands?"

"Wiz zis." Hippolyte held up his slim, short steel. 'Wiz ze *arme blanche.*"

"You buy me one minute's time and I'll do somethin' myself," said Blaster. His hands were busy in the cigar box, expertly sorting its contents. "I got a peek at what's in this thing they didn't need to use. I'll surprise yuh. Luck to yuh, Hippo, yuh little gamecock."

"*Bonne chance, camarade,*" said Hippo simply.

The dark of the tunnel swallowed him as he went fast on his hands and knees toward the light. Blaster worked furiously and fast, his clasp knife open and slicing. His blunt fingers, in the dark, fixed and arranged. With every second the light of the bull's-eye grew clearer as it neared the first rock.

"All right, boys!" he heard Matthew say savagely. "Into the tunnel. We're off!"

"Is that so?" shouted Blaster.

"We're comin' for yuh, Breen!" snarled Matthew.

Along the seat of Blaster's corduroy pants went the match and sputtered into flame. He touched it to the thing he held in his hand and sparks spat out. Jerking upright, he looked over the top of the rock. Matthew Merridew was just hauling himself over the lip of the tunnel, only feet away. His savage, bearded face looked twice life-size, staring into Blaster's. He had his six-gun between his teeth by the trigger guard and as he lifted himself onto the shelf his right hand reached up and grasped it.

Over the top of the rock went Blaster's hand and the thing it held fell to the sand in front of Matthew. Matthew's eyes protruded from his head in horror, his involuntary recoil jerked his body back and he hung halfway in the tunnel and halfway in the pit, momentarily undecided.

"More to come, if need be!" yelled Blaster vehemently.

Fighting for balance, Matthew got his six-gun up and Blaster crouched back. "When it comes to firin' it's who fires the first and the biggest that counts!" he bawled.

HE TURNED and stared back up the tunnel. The light was coming around the shoulder of the rock. It flared straight down the trench, mercilessly revealing Blaster's big form. It lifted upward and Blaster knew what that meant. Mark had risen from a crawling position to his knees to fire.

He saw the deadly twin barrels jutting forward in the glare of the bull's-eye that hung on Mark's chest, he glimpsed the bush of beard at the stock as the barrels leveled on him. He saw also the figure of Hippolyte prone on the floor of the tunnel, not four yards from the bull's-eye. Hippolyte was slowly inching forward.

Blazing, the sawed-off roared and its pattern of lead whipped inches only above Blaster's flattened form and slugged into the rock behind him. The muzzles lowered for the second barrel that surely would not miss him.

A lavender arm swept into view in the bull's-eye sheen, the right arm of Hippolyte going forward from behind his shoulder as he lifted himself on his left hand, under the sawed-off's barrels. There was a flash of light through the drifting smoke, the clean shimmer of steel driving straight for the chest of the kneeling Mark.

Then all vision, all hearing vanished in the tunnel in a single tremendous roar. From the other side of the rock against which Blaster lay, the pit side, rose flame and smoke and the reeling impact of the terrific explosion of a stick of dynamite. . . .

Blaster had little recollection of what happened after that until somehow or other he found himself surrounded by excited men, and heard his own voice telling Marshal Penny what had happened—so far as he knew.

"Shore I cut the fuse to five seconds," said Blaster. "I dynamited 'em with their own safe-crackin' supply that was in the cigar box I grabbed. No, Marshal, I didn't sling the stick into the pit like an amachoor and blow 'em ter smithereens. They was ninety thousand in post office cash in a bag that would have gone up in smoke if I had done something like that.

"Me, I am an expert dynamite man. I let my pretty plaything drop onto a sand base with the rock to back it, and threw it sidewise and blew the whole top and side of the pit in on 'em. I drowned 'em in sand. Dig till yuh strike beards, boys!"

CHAPTER VIII

Lucky Strike

AIDED by the light of lanterns under the open trap a crew of men with shovels delved into the heaped sand that swamped the pit. Soon the first form was emerging from its interment, that of Luke. The digging crew shoveled on and John came to light. Both men were senseless and purple in the face from strangulation, covered from head to foot with clinging sand.

"Yuh blew the blazes out of the post office floor," said the marshal, grinning, and jerked his thumb upward to the splintered boards. The faces of an excited crowd peered through the ruins. "Yuh knocked old Pop Dorgan into the middle of Continental Street and all the glasses fell off the Mesquite bar where I was, an' broke. Yuh've got a sweet bill for damages to pay, Blaster."

"Listen, yuh old pinto," growled Blaster. "I've saved the Government a fortune and captured four desperate 'Wanteds' for yuh. The missin' Mark is layin' wounded down the tunnel waitin' to be drug out. Hippo got him with his little toadsticker. Right into Luke's chest he slung it in the face of Luke's sawed-off."

"I 'ave charge ze Prussian cannon at Sedan," said Hippolyte debonairly. The lavender frock coat was a ruin, the beautifully creased pants were sand-stained and wrinkled into a hopeless mess. "W'at is ze sawed-off aftaire zat? Be'old, I can throw ze blade as well as I can fence wiz it."

"And here is Brother Matthew, my particular pard, completin' the roundup," said Blaster.

The shovels, busily plying, uncovered a pair of tall black boots. They stuck up from under the weight of sand in ungainly stiffness. Blaster produced a cigar and, leaning down, struck a match on the sole of the nearest protruding boot. He ignited the cigar.

"Thanks, Matthew, old scratchbox, yuh saved my pants. What do I care about damages, Marshal? Yuh owe Hippo and me ten thousand bucks reward. Look, this is how I got on to 'em. This come off the post office board."

He drew the crumpled circular with its penciled beards, from his hip pocket, and

shoved it into Pennypacker's hand.

"Ah!" said the marshal. "Not only defaced Government property ag'in, despite official warnin', but stole it. And just where do yuh see anything about a ten-thousand-buck reward? That was the first time they was captured. Either the Post Office Department forgot to offer a reward after they broke jail or they ain't got the money to pay out twice. There ain't no reward on these desperados' heads, Blaster. Yuh must of been seein' things!"

An agonized howl rang under the post office floor. It became a splutter as Blaster stepped back. The unconscious form of Mace Creede, alias Matthew Merridew, limp and sand-encrusted, was lifted from its resting place and thrust aloft through the hole in the post office floor.

"Take 'em to the calaboose," ordered Marshal Pennypacker placidly. "Roll 'em over a barrel or somethin' till the sand comes out of their lungs. Back to the pen in Frisco they go."

"So Hippo and I git—"

"Yuh get zero," said Marshal Pennypacker. "It's the break of the luck."

"It is the break of the cussedest—"

Wildly Blaster's fist lashed out and it struck solid rock. It was the wall of rock against which he had set off his explosion, stripped now of sand for a full six feet at the side of the pit. It gleamed with a strange whiteness that ran in huge splotches and veins amid the black, revealed by the blast.

"Luck! Luck! Break of the luck! It's come! It's come!"

The roar reverberated in the pit. Blaster was pressing a quarter against the nearest white splotch. The coin came away and its imprint was clear on the space.

"Hippo! We are rich! It is my lucky strike! It is free silver!"

"Huh?" demanded Marshal Pennypacker.

Blaster reached out and clasped the diminutive form of Hippolyte to his massive chest. In the sand of the pit he executed a war dance.

"Hippo, little pardner! It's ours! Like I said, silver is where yuh least expect it. I was right when I waited for my silver mountain to find me. It's a spur of rich and wealthy ore runnin' out from the hills, and it's half mine and half yores. In Tombstone, Arizona, they took a fortune out of a stope under the main street. Here I go to file our claim! Free silver is worth a million!"

MARSHAL PENNYPACKER stared at the imprint of the coin on the bared ore. His grin grew even broader.

"Blaster," he said, "I thank yuh in the name of the United States Government."

"You thank me in—"

"Yuh're struck free silver, all right, and if it ain't fool's silver, like fool's gold, I reckon it is worth a whole lot. But you've struck it under the United States post office on land owned by the United Staes Government, and it belongs to the United States Government which no doubt will run yuh off a nice silver medal from it for discoverin' it. This ain't yores and Hippo's, Blaster."

"We catch yore post-office robber 'Wanteds,' which yuh're too dim-witted to see through their beards, and Hippo and me get nothin' for it? We save yore post office ninety thousand bucks, and we get nothin' for it? We strike mebbe a million-dollar lode under yore post office, and we get nothin' for it?"

Blaster's face grew even wilder and his hair and beard seemed about to burst into flame.

"Yore little pardner will get plenty from it," said Marshal Pennypacker. "The tale of his darin' exploit in that there tunnel will bring the biggest rush of cash beard trade to his shop the West ever seen. Over desert and mountain the customers will trek to him. His fortune is made.

"But you, Blaster"—the marshal shook his head sadly—"it is like yuh thought yuh had a royal straight flush in spades and one of 'em turned out to be the deuce of clubs. I don't even think the Princess Mine will give yuh a raise in yore dynamiter's wages for discoverin' a rival strike that may put 'em to shame. Mebbe yuh have even blew yoreself out of a job."

Blaster gulped. He fought for speech.

"This," he finally got out, "is too much! It is several times too blame much!"

"But I'll buy yuh a drink at the Mesquite Saloon, even if I have to appropriate Government funds," said the marshal. "When I come back from the final details concernin' the prisoners at the calaboose. So long, Blaster. . . . Yuh shoveled up the post offijce money, diggers? Bring it along to the jail for safe-keepin'."

He swung up through the floor and disappeared.

"Shall we follow, *mon ami*?" said Hippolyte. "Shall we seek ze upper air? Let us resort to *Maison* Petitpois."

"Not that way, Hippo," said Blaster dolefully. "Let's crawl back to Maison Pettypwah through the tunnel. I feel like a snake."

They emerged through the hole in *Maison* Petitpois' flooring and turned up the lamp wick.

"I feel like the wreck of all human hope," said Blaster dolefully. "A fortune in our hands and the Government drygulches it."

"Your Barbarossa beard, *camarade!*" exclaimed Hippolyte. "Eet is ze wreck of all my 'opes! Ze desert sands 'ave ruin your beard and hair from ze explosion! Zey are steef wiz ze dirt. Climb into my chair, Blastaire, and I shall soothe and repair you wiz ze best egg shampoo in *Maison* Petitpois."

The minutes passed and on Blaster's head rose a great billow of creamy lather. His beard, resting in a neck basin, had disappeared under a similar soapy tide. The deft fingers of Hippolyte worked busily away, the voice of Hippolyte comforted.

"Zere, forget ze troubles. Ze calm, ze peace, eet descend on ze worried brow wiz ze shampoo and ze face cream massage."

A shattering crash resounded from next door. It was repeated even more loudly. Blaster sat upright.

"That's from Parker's Drygoods Emporium!" he exclaimed. "Is somebody tearin' it down?"

"Howdy, gents."

The unprepossessing figure of One-Gallus Benny, the Mesquite swamper, filtered through the door. He held out a sheet of paper with one hand while using the other to keep his pants up, as usual.

"For you, Blaster, from Marshal Penny over to the Mesquite. Grab it."

MORE crashing sounded. The *Maison* Petitpois seemed to be overwhelmed by the splintering racket now coming from both sides. Blaster stared at the sheet. The message read:

> I hereby summons you both to a drink on the United States Government. It may own the post office strike, but Hippo owns his store and ground forty feet away. And you are his partner. Cheer up, Blaster, you did noble. Dig away like the rest of Eureka.
>
> Deputy Marshal John Pennypacker.

Blaster leaped from the barber's throne in a bound. Neck basin and sheet went onto the floor. Eyes wildly glaring through the screen of lather he seized the crowbar leaning against the wall and jumped into the hole in the planking that had been left uncovered.

"Hippo! We forgot! Yore *maison* will be over that silver hill spur at the post office if it ain't narrer as a lath! No wonder there is a crushin' and a smashin' goin' on all around! Every store owner on this side of the street has got up outa bed and is rippin' up his floor boards an' diggin' to see if he is over the strike!"

The crowbar, plied with all Blaster's tremendous force, tore into the sand floor of the trench. It drove for six inches and stopped with a thud. It drove again, feet away, and thudded once more. Blaster climbed out of the hole, scattering a soapy foam in all directions.

"Hippo, the rock is there! The silver spur is there! Yuh're rich!"

"You too are reech, Blastaire! We are partnairs, *mon ami!* You 'ave declare me in on your strike w'at ze Government took away, I declare you in on zis one. Eet ees ze same strike, aftair all. Petitpois and Breen, ze owners of ze Silvaire Shampoo Mine. *Quel nom!*"

"The crowd is now tearin' up the middle of Continental Street with pick-axes," announced One-Gallus Benny from the door.

Wild yells, shouts and blows, the continued splintering of wood resounded in the desert night.

"There goes the floorin' of half the buildin's on both sides," said Benny. "When I get back to the Mesquite I suppose they'll have that floor up, too and I'll be unemployed with nothin' to broom. This whole town will be tore down flat by daylight."

"Relax, Blastaire!" said Hippolyte happily. "Tomorrow we dig for ze silver. Tonight we feenish ze shampoo and zen we celebrate. W'at weel you do weeth all your fortune, Blastaire?"

Blaster's head went back under the fingers of Hippolyte. Contentedly he spread his huge frame in the barber's chair and now hardly more than his nose and mouth were visible under the soapy foam.

"If it's a million dollars, which there ain't no reason it shouldn't be," gurgled Blaster, "I'm goin' to buy the United States Government and fire that cussed Marshal Penny."

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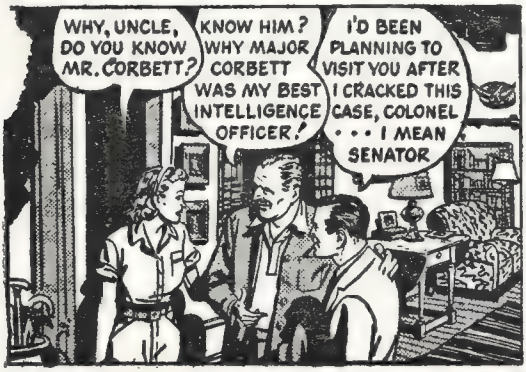
Next Month: LEAD AND FLAME, a Walt Slade Novel by Bradford Scott

TERRY TRAPPED THE ALIEN SMUGGLERS AND THEN . . .

HURRYING TO REACH HER UNCLE'S CAMP ON LAKE HURON BEFORE DARK, BETTY ADAMS STUMBLES UPON MYSTERIOUS DOINGS IN WATKINS COVE



The Colts of Wilson and Young were roaring before the trio got their weapons raised

TROUBLE ON HORSEBACK

By JACKSON COLE

The Y Bar W pards battle a passel of sidewinders!

IT WAS the sort of bright, clear summer morning that made a man feel good. In the Y Bar W cavvy corral, the horses were romping around and acting right frisky. Dan Wilson, tall, lean, and with light hair that gleamed in the sun, hummed a tune as he stepped out of the ranchhouse and walked down toward the barn. The way he figured, it made a man right proud to be half owner of a good little ranch like this one.

"Shore is a grand mornin', Bill," he said, strolling over to where his partner was sitting on a bench in front of the bunkhouse mending a bridle. "Makes me feel good."

"Wish I felt the same," Bill Young grumbled. He was a small, gray-haired man, getting along in years, but he was still a good cowhand. "I got a feelin'—" he added and then stopped.

"What's worryin' yuh now?" Wilson asked, and grinned. At least twenty years younger than his partner, he did not take life so seriously. "Yuh shore have a lot of things botherin' yuh, Bill."

"It's a dream I had last night," Young said slowly. "Usually I don't pay much mind to such things, but this dream seemed mighty real."

"Tell me about it."

Wilson dropped down on the bench.

"Well," said Bill, "in the dream I was right here at the ranch, and it was bright like the sun was shinin', then all of a sudden it starts to get dark. Out of that darkness comes a feller on a black hoss. He rides up and I get a good look at his white face. He' a stranger, so I ask his name. 'I'm Death,' I says—and then I woke up."

"Shucks!" Dan Wilson laughed. Yuh wa just havin' a nightmare. That ain't nothin' to worry about, Bill."

YOUNG did not answer. He was looking at something off to the south, back where the range country gave way to the foothills. There was something in his partner's expression that made Wilson look in the same direction. A rider was heading toward the ranch, a man in range clothes,

mounted on a big black horse. The rider was still too far off for Wilson to recognize him.

"A stranger," Bill Young said, in an odd tone. "And he's ridin' a black hoss." He shivered, though it was warm in the sun. "First time I ever had even part of a dream come true. Kind of scares me, Dan."

"Just happened so." Wilson was still watching the approaching rider. He caught a glimpse of a pale face beneath a black Stetson as the horsemen grew closer. "Heard Jed Harney was hirin' some new hands. This hombre might be one of 'em."

He glanced at his partner, then lapsed into silence. Bill wasn't even listening to what he was saying.

Dan Wilson got to thinking of how he and Bill had worked as cowhands on various spreads, saving their pay with the idea of sometime owning a little ranch of their own. That dream had come true six months ago when they had bought this ranch and registered the Y Bar W brand as their own. Y for Young and W for Wilson.

The horseman rode up and reined his black to a halt a little distance away from the two men sitting on the bench. He sat motionless in his saddle, staring at them without speaking, his pale face expressionless.

"Howdy, stranger," Wilson said finally. "Light and rest yore saddle." He smiled. "I'm Dan Wilson and this is my pardner, Bill Young."

"Been lookin' for yuh," said the stranger in a deep voice, his dark eyes fixed on Young. "My name is Deth—"

Bill Young uttered a wild yell before the stranger could finish. The old ex-waddy leaped up from the bench and rushed into the bunkhouse, slamming the door behind him.

"What's eatin' him?" demanded the stranger, in surprise.

"Afraid yuh reminded him of a nightmare he had," said Wilson. "Which ain't meant to be unflatterin'. What did yuh say yore name might be?"

"Dethridge." The man swung out of saddle, dropping the reins and ground-hitching the black. "Mark Dethridge." He looked around with the air of a man returning to once familiar surroundings. "Shore is good to be home again."

"Huh?" Wilson stared in amazement. "Did yuh say home?"

"I did." Dethridge nodded. "Glad to see you boys took such good care of my ranch while I've been away."

"*Yore* ranch?" Wilson scowled. "Reckon there must be some mistake. This ranch belongs to me and my pardner. We bought it six months ago."

The door of the bunkhouse opened and Young stood there. Evidently he had heard the conversation through an open window.

"Too bad," said Dethridge coldly. He was a big man, and he stood there with his hand close to the butt of the gun in the holster on his right leg. "Looks to me like you two hombres tried to put somethin' over on a dead man."

"What dead man?" demanded Young anxiously. He came back to the bench and sat down.

"Me," Dethridge said. "I'm dead."

"Yuh don't look it." Dan Wilson's tone was dry.

"I mean as far as folks around here are concerned," said Dethridge. "I've been away for five years—at a place I couldn't get away from."

Wilson nodded. It sounded as if this Dethridge had been in prison somewhere for five years. That would explain why the fellow's face was so pale.

"Yuh owned this ranch five years ago before yuh went away?" Wilson asked. But his real attention was on a shadow that moved at the corner of the bunkhouse. Was that a man standing there listening? "Is that right, Dethridge?"

"It is," said Dethridge. "When I went away——"

"When yuh went to prison, yuh mean," interrupted Wilson.

"All right—when I went to prison for a crime I didn't commit," Dethridge went on impatiently. "I left the ranch in charge of a lawyer named Adam Parker. Gave him power of attorney, because I trusted him. Figgered he'd take care of the spread for me till I got free."

"Adam Parker sold us this spread six months ago," Wilson told him. "He claimed the title to the property was all clear. Said the feller who had owned it was dead. We believed Parker."

"But if yuh was in jail, why did folks around here think yuh was dead?" demanded Bill Young. "How about that, Dethridge?"

"I found out that Parker claimed I died in prison two years ago," said Dethridge. A wave of anger suddenly appeared to sweep over him, and he wandered idly toward the

corner of the bunkhouse. "That's why folks think I'm dead. I reckon—"

FROM the side of the bunkhouse there came the roar of a gun. Wilson and Young grabbed for their Colts. Dethridge reeled back as a bullet tore into his chest, then pitched forward on his face, to sprawl motionless on the ground.

"Come on, Bill!" Wilson shouted, breaking into a run. "Let's get that killer!"

Ahead of him Wilson heard someone running, then the sound stopped. And when he reached the back of the bunkhouse a man was galloping away on a bay horse. Wilson did not recognize the rider. He threw up his gun to fire but didn't pull trigger, for at that moment the horseman disappeared behind a clump of trees.

"He got away!" panted Bill Young from behind Wilson, disgust in his voice. "Looks like we're in a tight, Dan."

"Meanin' what?" Dan Wilson swung around and gazed at his partner.

"If Dethridge is dead, who's goin' to believe we didn't kill him?" Young demanded. "Folks'll figger Dethridge come here, found we'd taken over his spread, got in a fight with us and we downed him."

"Might be," agreed Wilson. "But let's see about Dethridge. Mebbe he's still alive."

They went back to the place where Mark Dethridge was sprawled on the ground. A quick examination showed that the former owner of the ranch was dead. The bullet had entered his heart and killed him. Wilson stood up, a strange expression on his face as he looked at his partner.

"Accordin' to what this Dethridge told us nobody hereabouts knew he was still alive except the hombre who killed him," he said.

"Yuh figger the killer might be Adam Parker?" asked Young.

"I don't know—might be." Wilson frowned. "Suppose we bury Dethridge here on the spread—which seems fitting, since he once owned the place—then wait to see what happens. Like as not that feller will be back lookin' for the body. Then we'll nail him."

"And suppose the sheriff shows up and claims we killed a man and are hidin' the body?" said Young. "What then? The sheriff shore won't like us none."

"Aw, Sheriff Matt Farrell is a reasonable man," Wilson told Bill. "He'll believe the right of it if we can show him the real killer."

Bill Young did not offer any further argument. They searched through the dead man's pockets, got his personal belongings, and wrapped them in a handkerchief. Back on a hill that was part of the ranch property, they dug a grave, wrapped Mark Dethridge in a blanket and buried him. They had unsaddled the dead man's black horse and turned him into the cavvy corral.

"Funny," remarked Bill Young after the grave had been filled in and they had returned to the barn with the spades. "That dream I had last night about Death arriving on a black hoss shore come true—though not exactly the way I was afraid it might."

Dan Wilson nodded. He was glad the four waddies who worked for them were over north getting strays out of the brush this morning. The way Wilson figured it was a good thing that only Young and himself had been at the ranch when Mark Dethridge had showed up. The black horse in the corral would take some explaining, of course, but Dan thought that wouldn't be hard to do.

Bill Young sat down on the bench again, and went on with his bridle repairing. The cook arrived from town with the wagon loaded with supplies. Old Cookie Lee was always a source of news when he got back from Latigo, and this trip was no exception.

"There's been some excitement in town," he announced as Wilson helped him unload the wagon and carry the supplies to the cook shack. "Two masked men held up the Latigo Bank early this mornin'. Shot Jeff Rawlings, the teller, and got away with fifty thousand dollars."

"How much, Cookie?" asked Wilson.

"Well, mebbe ten thousand dollars anyway," said the cook. "There's a lot of wild talk, and the bank president ain't sayin' exactly how much dinero is missin'. Sheriff Farrell is out with a posse searchin' for them bank robbers. But there's one thing I don't like."

"What?" asked Wilson, when it looked as if Cookie Lee wasn't going to say anything more.

"There's talk about the bank robbers lookin' a lot like you and Bill Young," said the cook flatly. "Which is plumb silly, when neither of yuh ain't even been near town today."

"If we're suspected of bein' the bank robbers why hasn't the sheriff come here after us?" demanded Wilson.

"'Cause Farrell didn't believe it," said Cookie. "It was Adam Parker who claimed

he saw the two men come out of the bank after the robbery. Parker says he saw 'em from the winder of his office across the street. He said the masked men looked a heap like you and Bill."

"Sounds like Parker is a good friend of ours," Wilson drawled ironically.

HE FINISHED helping the cook unload the stuff, then went and told Bill Young about the news Cookie had brought from town. The older partner listened until Wilson had finished, then he cursed softly.

"Looks like Parker is playin' both ends against the middle," he said shortly. "Tryin' to get us accused of bein' bank robbers, then killing off Dethridge."

"If Parker did kill Dethridge," reminded Wilson. "Remember we ain't certain of that yet."

Along about noon Sheriff Farrell and a ten-man posse showed up at the Y Bar W. Adam Parker was riding with them. The lawyer looked like a lean black buzzard riding a horse.

"We're huntin' a couple of bandits who robbed the Latigo Bank this mornin'," the sheriff announced. "Seen anything of a couple of strangers around, Dan?"

"Not a sign," said Wilson. "Heard about the bank robbery though."

"You see, Sheriff?" snapped Parker in his rasping voice. "Wilson and Young are the men I saw. You notice they knew all about the bank robbery before you told them about it."

"How about it, Dan?" asked the sheriff quietly.

"Cookie Lee just got back from town with supplies for the ranch," Wilson said candidly. "He told us about the robbery."

Keeping a close eye on Parker, he saw that the lawyer kept looking around as though searching for something. Did that mean that Parker was trying to discover what had happened to Mark Dethridge? Even if Parker had been the man who shot Dethridge, there was no way he could be sure that his victim was dead.

Wilson walked over to where the lawyer sat his saddle, and the young ranch owner glared at the man.

"Yuh seem right anxious to accuse me and Bill of bein' the bank robbers," he snapped. "Mebbe too anxious."

Abruptly Wilson caught Parker by the arm and dragged him out of saddle. The lawyer hit the ground hard, but scrambled to his feet with a snarl and rushed Wilson.

The sheriff and the posse sat motionless, watching. Bill Young edged closer, watching warily.

Wilson smashed a right to Parker's chin, and a left to his body. Both were tall men, and weighed about the same, and surprisingly Parker proved that he knew how to fight. He broke through Wilson's guard, landed some hard blows that really hurt.

"Hit him, Dan!" shouted Bill Young excitedly. "Knock him out!"

The fighters closed in, smashing blows at each other. No one noticed that two members of the posse quietly edged their horses away from the mounts of the other men.

Wilson was fighting hard, and soon sensed that Parker was weakening. He hit the man a hard blow on the chest over the heart, followed with a right to the chin, and the lawyer dropped to the ground—knocked out.

"He was askin' for it," drawled the sheriff. "Looks like he got what was comin' to him. I never did believe his story about you and Bill being the bank robbers, Dan."

"Yuh find any traces of them two bank robbers yet, Sheriff?" Wilson asked wearily, for the fight had been a hard one.

"Not any," said Farrell. "Seems like they just disappeared into thin air. Funny thing, too. No strangers have been see around town durin' the past week or so."

"Adam Parker knows who them bank robbers was," Wilson declared grimly. "That's why he's been so anxious to have folks think Bill and me was them two men."

On the ground, Parker moaned and sat up. He staggered to his feet, a wild expression on his face.

"Where is he?" he demanded, reaching for his gun. "I'll kill him!"

"Yuh're not doin' any shootin' around here, Parker," snapped the sheriff. "Put that gun away before yuh get into trouble."

Then Wilson saw the two hard-faced men who had drifted a little apart from the rest of the posse. He didn't know their names, but he remembered that they had been hanging around Parker's office the last time Wilson had been in town.

The two men seemed tense, and their hands were close to the butts of their guns as they listened to what was being said, and watched everything that went on.

"All right," Parker growled sullenly, dropping his gun back into holster. "But I still

claim that Dan Wilson and Bill Young were the bank robbers. I'll prove it before I'm through!"

He stalked to his horse and swung into saddle. Wilson was standing so close to him that only Parker heard him when he said to the lawyer:

"It was a good shot. Got him right through the heart."

PARKER looked startled, but said nothing. He was scowling as he wheeled his horse and rode away. With a word of command from the sheriff, the posse also departed.

Wilson and Young stood watching until the horsemen topped a ridge and disappeared. Then Bill Young sighed.

"Looks like Adam Parker's our man, all right," he said. "But we ain't got much chance of provin' it."

"Don't be so shore of that," Wilson said grimly. "Bill, I'm ridin' after that posse. Got an idea that Parker and a couple of other gents won't stay with the sheriff long."

"Then I'm ridin' with yuh," Young announced firmly. "Otherwise it might be three against one—and that ain't such good odds."

Wilson didn't argue, and the two ranch owners got their saddles and gear from the harness shed and headed for the corral to rope a couple of horses from their string.

When the horses were saddled they rode out of the corral and closed the gate. As Dan Wilson fastened it he suddenly realized that they were starting off on what might prove a wild goose chase. If Parker and his two men had already left the posse there was no way of knowing where they might have gone.

Even though Dan was good at reading sign, he doubted that he would be able to trail the three men. It hadn't rained for two or three days and the ground was fairly hard. There wasn't much chance of following the hoof tracks of the horses the three men rode.

"Looks like we won't have to do much lookin' for them three," Young said abruptly. "We got visitors comin'."

Wilson glanced in the direction his partner indicated and saw three riders heading toward the ranch—coming fast. Even from the distance Wilson recognized Parker and the two hard-faced men who had been with the posse.

"Trouble comin' on horseback!" Young said tightly. "Adam Parker and a couple of other hombres."

Wilson swung out of saddle, dropping his reins and ground-hitching his horse.

"Climb down, Bill," he ordered. "Yuh can shoot better from the ground than yuh can from a hoss' back."

"Somethin' to that." Young quickly dismounted, and let his reins fall. "But I shore would feel better if my back was up against a buildin'."

"Me, too," agreed Wilson.

They hurried over and stood waiting with the side wall of the barn at their backs. Parker and his two men rode up and halted their horses close to them.

"We came back to ask you a few questions," Parker said coldly. "I still believe you two are the bank robbers."

"No, yuh don't," Wilson said coldly. "We couldn't be, since the gents who robbed that bank are with yuh right now."

"That's a lie!" snarled one of the hard-faced men. "We don't know nothin' about the bank robbery."

Wilson thought he heard a faint noise from the front of the barn. It sounded as if someone had stepped inside. Wilson remembered the open window just above his head and didn't like the idea of somebody being inside there, listening. It might be dangerous. Maybe somebody else was working with Parker.

Then a thought struck Dan Wilson, and a wave of relief swept over him. Cookie Lee—that was it! The old ranch cook had sneaked into the barn and was listening to what was going on.

"Never mind the bank robbery now, Blake," snapped Adam Paker. "What I want to know is what happened to Dethridge."

"You killed him and we buried him," Wilson answered calmly. "Guess yuh couldn't afford to have the man yuh cheated out of his ranch remain alive, Parker."

"I didn't kill him," Parker said coolly. "Blake here did that."

"At yore orders," spoke up the man called Blake. "Me and Connor here trailed Dethridge here after—"

"After yuh robbed the bank," interrupted Wilson, his eyes on the saddle rolls on Blake and Connor's horses. "Reckon yuh're talkin' right free because yuh're figgerin' me and Bill ain't got long to live."

"You haven't," Parker said grimly. "There's been enough talk already. Let them

have it, boys!"

The three men grabbed for their guns, sure of their speed on the draw—but found that they had made a mistake. The Colts of Wilson and Young were out and roaring before the trio got their weapons raised.

ADAM PARKER slid out of saddle as a bullet from Wilson's gun got him in the chest. Blake reeled back, grabbing the horn with both hands as Young shot him. Connor died from Wilson's second shot.

"They shore misjudged us," commented Dan Wilson as he stood staring at the havoc caused by the guns. "Remember the year we worked as deputy sheriffs down near the Badlands, Bill? A feller had to be fast with a gun to get along in them days."

"Some battle while it lasted," called a voice from the barn window.

They looked up. Sheriff Farrell stood there looking out.

"Figgered somethin' was wrong when them three was so anxious to leave the rest of the posse," drawled the lawman. "I let 'em go, and trailed 'em here."

Wilson caught Blake's horse—and a dead man slid to the ground from the kak. And when the young ranch owner took the blanket roll from the dead man's saddle and opened it, rolls of bills fell out.

Sheriff Farrell appeared from the barn. He blinked when he saw the money on the ground.

"So Blake and Connor was the bank robbers all right," said the lawman. "And they had the nerve to carry the money they got from the bank right with 'em when they rode with the posse."

"They shore did," agreed Dan Wilson. "Thought mebbe that was it when I saw they had saddle rolls with 'em, and wasn't makin' a trip anywheres, and I was right."

"What was this talk about Dethridge bein' killed?" demanded Sheriff Farrell.

"That's a long story." Wilson sighed. "Suppose we go up to the ranchhouse and have a good drink while I tell yuh about that?"

"Suits me," said the sheriff. "Let's go."

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

HOLA, folks, here are five more questions about the West. Test yore wits by tryin' to get the plumb proper replies. Each correct answer yuh savvy counts 20%, and 60% or over is passing. If yuh get 80% or over yuh're a top hand. Our answers are on Page 89—but DON'T LOOK BEFORE TRYIN'!

1. Why did punchers carry a horseshoe in their slicker roll in the days of open range?
2. What is a running iron?
3. Name the four main staples of food taken on long trail drives in the old days.
4. What would the fee of a frontier doctor be for a visit or treatment?
5. When were the New Mexican Rangers started? And why?

Beagle put all he had into a flying leap across space to the tree, and his body whipped astraddle of the swaying fir

An Action Novelet

A MAN TO TAKE

CHAPTER I

One Long Chance

THE PRISONER fidgeted, ill at ease in his seat. He felt the little sheriff's eyes upon him from the other side of the table.

To sit calmly in a regular eating house, to have a tall and lissome girl stand at his elbow to take his order—these were new and strange things to "Twist" Beagle, lean and longlimbed brushpopper that he was.

But he was catching on. He looked up at the girl, and his eyes were like the brown moss in deep mountain pools.

"Could you bring me that there pork and beans again, if yuh please, miss?" he asked.

The girl's serious face suddenly was wreathed in a smile. She was flushing as she turned to the older man, Sheriff Ryland, as if for reassurance.

Sheriff Harv Ryland Sets a Thief to Catch a

WOLF TAMPLIN

By HENRY HALDEMAN

"Just make it two, Milly," Ryland said and nodded approvingly.

His manner was casual, as if Milly didn't know that he had left a standing order for pork and beans the moment he learned what was his prisoner's favorite dish. He was like that, though there were some who said Harv Ryland would be good to his prisoners once too often.

As the girl fluttered away toward the kitchen, Twist Beagle's eyes followed her. They were still on her when she came back with the dinners.

After she had served them and gone back to the kitchen again, the sheriff and his prisoner ate in thoughtful silence. Twist Beagle finally pushed back his dishes. When he had built a cigarette, his steady eyes leveled upon Harv Ryland.

"Sheriff," he said, "yuh ain't foolin' me none. Lawmen don't take cow thieves to dinner with 'em every day, fatten 'em up,

Thief When Peril Hovers Over the Range!

treat 'em like kings, without they got a reason. They's a joker in the deck somewheres."

The sheriff laughed, though he looked a little uneasy.

"Shore I got a reason," he said heartily. "I like good company when I eat. And—well, mebbe I been wantin' yuh to see how folks live on t'other side of the fence. Mebbe I've took to yuh, Twist. Yuh're smart. Not meanin' because yuh're good with a shootin' iron, which yuh are. But because yuh're still better with yore head, and yuh got an honest eye."

Twist Beagle's thin lips formed a half grin. The two were sitting in a private booth, and he made a gesture which took in this clean, pleasant eating house to which the sheriff had been bringing him.

"I'm askin' yuh a question, Sheriff," he said. "Will they treat me like this at State prison—like yuh're treatin' me here?"

Harv Ryland snorted, cleared his throat.

"Lord, no, feller. Not in that durn place."

IN THIS rambunctious community it took a good man to hold Sheriff Ryland's job, and Ryland was good. He was, in more ways than one. But sometimes things did get out of hand, as they had of late, when he found himself in a tight spot. Last week, in considering how he could straighten things out, he had wandered into the restaurant kitchen with his worries.

"Look, Milly," he had complained playfully, "just because yuh're waitin' on a jail bird I been bringin' in here for a danged good reason, yuh don't need to act like yuh're at a funeral, do yuh? Gosh, can't yuh smile at him once? Tell yuh what—I'll give yuh a big round dollar for every time yuh smile. 'Course, yuh needn't overdo it."

Milly had not. Instead, she had acted more than ever as if she were attending a funeral. But the sheriff was not to be floored. He had other ways of pleasing his prisoner. And though Twist was a proud and mettlesome customer, Ryland contrived to get him into a barber shop, then to a clothing store.

And now here they were again at the restaurant for dinner. Even Ryland was a bit staggered at the change he saw in the harried, hard-faced youth of six weeks ago, whom the law had caught asleep with an exhausted herd of stolen cows. The two long-whiskered jaspers who had been with him had managed to hightail. But all along, the old-time sheriff had had an idea that the youngster was more sinned against than sinning.

Twist Beagle himself had been about stunned when he had stood up before the long mirror in the clothing store. Brand new levis, topped with a soft green-and-cream shirt, sure did make a fetching off-set for his dark, "store-cut" hair. Beagle had just stood there grinning, running an amazed hand over his smooth, bleached cheeks from which the razor had taken a full inch of fine, scraggly beard.

"Probably his first town shave," Harv Ryland was thinking now. "Anyway, it snared a smile from Milly. She's earned herself a dollar, bless her heart."

But some of that healthy new color in Twist's face faded at what the sheriff said about State prison.

"Yuh don't quite get me, Twist," the little lawman said carefully. "Mebbe there is a joker in the deck. You and me come here and we talk. Fact is, yuh've paid me back, because yuh've learned me a heap of things."

"Like what?" Beagle was surprised.

"Twist, this county has got a lobo runnin' loose."

"Wolf Tamplin!" Beagle said in a breathless whisper.

"Yeah—and I never knew you run with Tamplin for nigh onto a year—till yuh told me yourself. Nor that you was with Tamplin when he looted the express at the Fishtail water tank—till yuh told me that too.

"That was a year ago," Twist said soberly. "I was plumb scared of Tamplin when he kept threatenin' to turn me over to the law for a rustlin' job I didn't do. But the folks I'd been workin' for thought I did, so I'd had to hightail—and wasn't nothin' else to do, far as I could see but tie up with Wolf. Had to do whatever he said, looked like, after a while, but I quit him all right on account of that Fishtail business. He claimed it was a failure on account of me—because I wouldn't use my gun."

"Wouldn't exactly call it a failure—from Wolf's viewpoint," said the sheriff. "The dirty skunk got nine hundred out of that Fishtail robbery."

Twist Beagle's hands shook as he built a cigarette, though he did not speak.

"Twist," the sheriff went on, "I got an idea. You knowin' Wolf Tamplin like yuh do, knowin' his hideout and being onto his tricks like yuh are—if you and me was to bring Tamplin in, it might do yuh a heap

of good when yore trial comes up for bein' caught with them rustled cows."

"Yuh mean I wouldn't have to go to prison—mebbe could get me a job, live here in Splitrock town?"

The sheriff saw his prisoner's eyes go hungrily toward the kitchen door, through which Milly had passed. Ryland rose and reached for his hat.

"Come on feller," he said, "let's stretch our legs."

They walked back to the jail where Twist Beagle returned to his cell and sat down on his bunk.

"I got to project round town a little," Ryland told him. "When I get back, we'll talk some more."

After the sheriff left, Beagle sat and thought. He thought what a wide difference there was between places and people, between "Wolf" Tamplin in his hideout, and a girl called Milly down at the restaurant. He had so many things to think about that it did not occur to Beagle that Harv Ryland had purposely given him this chance—just to think.

IN TWO hours the sheriff was back, unlocking Beagle's cell door. They went to the office and sat across from each other at Ryland's flat-top desk. The sheriff drew out a few papers.

"I've got some descriptions of Tamplin here," he said. "I'd like to see what you think of 'em, Twist."

Harv Ryland read:

"He is over six feet tall, weighs about two hundred and forty pounds. He has a slight paunch, but don't be fooled by Tamplin's weight—he is cat-quick . . . He is a fluent talker, somethin' of a scholar in his way. He is an outlaw by choice. He holds as interlopers all comers upon his domain, and stops at nothin' to make good his claim. . . He likes to fish and trap. His craft and cunning make him highly dangerous—"

Beagle was chuckling.

"That reminds me. Wolf's favorite sayin' is that a buzzard couldn't bring a strange smell into Redhoss Gulch where he hangs out, without he'd know it before sundown."

"Twist," said the sheriff, "if you and me was to bring Tamplin in—well, I can't make promises, but I'm darn shore it would help yuh."

Beagle stirred uneasily.

"I've thought it over, Sheriff," he said. "I'm against it. It wouldn't work. You wouldn't come home no more. Tamplin will shoot lawmen as far as he can read their brand. Yuh've treated me white, Mr. Ryland. If I was to steer yuh into Redhoss Gulch, I'd have to hate myself the rest of my life."

Ryland stared in dumb surprise. Yet he knew that Beagle was right.

Redhorse Gulch, which Wolf Tamplin claimed as his own domain, was a wild mountain area saddled across the corners of three counties. Each of the other counties had sent in lawmen after Wolf, but the men had never come back. Now both the other counties were throwing down the challenge to Splitrock. And Splitrock voters were thinking the home county ought to call their hands.

Wherefore, Harv Ryland had figured out a plan for corralling Wolf Tamplin, and part of that scheme had included offering Milly a dollar each for her smiles, as hard pressed for cash as he was. But it had worked—and now he had what might be a far-reaching decision to make.

The sheriff caught his breath.

"And you, bein' with me, wouldn't come back either," he said, and nodded, as he looked up. "But Twist, I see yuh got an idea. What is it?"

"Oh—I don't know." Twist shrugged. "Mebbe I could bring Tamplin in—if I was to go it alone. But that wouldn't do either, me bein' a prisoner. Nothin' to stop me from joinin' up again with—with Tamplin."

Ryland seemed not to hear. He swung back in his chair.

"I wonder—" He was speaking to the ceiling. "Mebbe here's the man for the job. Mebbe I could fix it. Why, if you was to take Wolf Tamplin, them cow stealin' charges would just evaporate. This whole state would pretty near be writin' songs about yuh, Twist Beagle."

The prisoner roused up, as if out of a dream.

"How soon can I start, Sheriff?"

"I'll saddle a horse," said Ryland and nodded, satisfied.

The moon had not yet risen when Twist Beagle was far out on the range, on his way. . . .

The region known as Redhorse Gulch was not properly a gulch at all, but a full seven miles of canyon, if measured by the little creek which took a snaky course through a maze of black and beetling mountains.

Beagle knew that he faced a life-and-death task, even if he were lucky enough to find Wolf Tamplin. He rode through the entrance to Redhorse on his third morning out from Splitrock. And all that day he spent in a slow, scouting advance.

Tamplin had a cabin of thick, hewn logs, but that was far up at timberline. Beagle knew that the outlaw was apt to vary his habits with the seasons, moving down to deeply hidden camps, a snug natural cave or two. When these activities began to bore the man, he would sally out for some new deed of banditry. He seldom worked the same way twice. But the hazards of such a life were wine and meat to Wolf Tamplin.

Tamplin was known usually to keep with him one renegade underling as a companion and watch dog. This renegade was thought to be a man named "Mossy" Bollen, who probably had succeeded Twist Beagle when Twist had broken his bondage to Wolf.

NOT UNTIL Twist's second day in the gulch, when he had scouted more than half its length, did he encounter the first sign of human life. It was past noon and he was probing along a dark timbered slope. He had dismounted and crept down to a little point overlooking the creek bed, when the faint *plunk* of a rifle sounded from up the canyon.

As he crouched there listening, watching, a dozen deer came pelting down the grassy flat just under him. The flushed animals were slowing down and had all but passed him when the rearmost deer faltered, turned sharply toward the slope as if for shelter, then collapsed on the grass.

Beagle hesitated a moment, then plunged down to it. It was a meaty, two-point buck, shot through the lungs. He drew his sheath knife—a part of the fine new outfit Harv Ryland had lavished upon him—and slit the animal's throat. Its blood made a tell-tale blotch on the grass, and this he quickly covered, leaving the fresh earth to look as if the running herd had gouged it up.

He carried the deer back against the slope, in behind a thick hedge of cedars, then climbed up and brought his horse down. He made each move after a slow and careful surveillance. But no hunter appeared on the trail of the deer, which must have run about a mile after it had been shot.

Completely hidden from all angles, Beagle hung up the two-pointer, deliberatly dressed it out and flayed off the skin. He buried all the offal. He was elated. For he knew he would hardly dare do any hunting on his own account, but he now had fresh meat which might come in good before he was through.

CHAPTER II

Lobo Trickster

IT WAS now mid-afternoon and Beagle was hungry. He had insisted on traveling light, carrying only the big tarp-covered roll lashed behind his saddle. He was facing this roll when some sound, or a mere shadow, caused him to whirl.

At the edge of the cedars, a dark, bull-like figure stood with a rifle trained upon him at waist level. Beagle's stricken glance took in the high, nondescript laced boots, the beaklike nose and black eyes which lit the shadow under the man's black slouch hat.

Wolf Tamplin!

"Well, if it ain't my old friend Twister! Back to join Tamplin again, eh?"

Wolf's surprise was genuine. But his hearty manner quickly faded in the face of Beagle's bleak stare and threatening stance.

"Easy, feller," Wolf barked. "I see that gun of yours is makin' yuh nervous—I'll take it."

Beagle saw the outlaw's rifle steady, a finger stiffen on its trigger as Wolf moved forward. Twist turned grudgingly, in obedience to the weapon's prodding gestures, and allowed his belt gun to be plucked from its holster.

Tamplin stepped back, examined the gun briefly, then fired it rapidly three times into the hill slope.

"Nice gun, Twister," he commented. "Pretty outfit yuh got, too. And yuh've fatted up some. Must've made a good haul."

The outlaw's tone had changed to glib mockery. Beagle bridled his fury and chagrin.

"What I'd like to know, Tamplin," he said, "is how come yuh found me with this deer yuh shot?"

"You ought to know, feller. A buzzard can't bring a strange smell in here, without I know it before sundown. Yuh did a sweet job, Twister, hidin' that blood. But as I

come pokin' down the crick, I see that a coyote had nosed it out.

"I watched him, and when he turns in here, thinks I, 'One of them big mountain cats has got my deer.' And here I find it's you. Mountain cat—mebbe I was right!" His tone changed, and he said wheedlingly, "You and me could pull off some big time stuff, Twister. But get a fire goin', boy! Let's eat. I'm starved."

"Tamplin," Beagle cut in, "yuh ain't foolin' me. Yuh've guessed it—I come in here to take yuh out. To the law."

"Oh-ho! Turned bounty hunter, eh? Yuh figger I done yuh on that Fishtail job, so yuh allowed to take it out of my hide. Out with it feller—how much they got agin Wolf Tamplin's scalp?"

"How should I know, Tamplin?" Any matter of rewards for Tamplin was a new idea to Beagle.

"I can tell yuh. Them rewards add up to four-five thousand dollars. Just like I thought, Twister—the John Laws are makin' a sucker out of yuh. Why don't they try it theirselves, I ask yuh? But no—they send you. If yuh're lucky, they get the bounty money. Yuh standin' for that?"

Tamplin broke off, cocking an ear. Beagle had to admit that the man's hearing sense was keener than his own.

"This way, Mossy!" the outlaw shouted without turning. "Come see what I caught!"

As Beagle had suspected, the outlaw's three pistol shots had been meant as a signal. A man appeared, leading two saddle horses, and Beagle got his first look at Mossy Bollen, Tamplin's watch dog, and all round chore man. He was a quick-moving waddling runt of a man with fuzzy hair and washed-out blue eyes. Twist had heard that Bollen was supposed to be not "all there" in his head.

Having noted Beagle's pack, Tamplin ordered Bollen to take it down and undo it. As the coffee, sugar, flour, and parcels of ham and bacon, dried meat and fruits were dumped out on the ground, the outlaw's eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

Beagle fumed inwardly at sight of his cans of pork and beans, recalling Harv Ryland's happy grin when he had brought these in, a special remembrance, and stacked them on the desk over which the two had been working out their plan.

"Go get the pack-hoss, Mossy," Tamplin directed.

Beagle recalled that the outlaw had had certain secret contacts outside, through whom he got supplies. But when Bollen brought the pack-horse, Twist noted that its greasy canvas panniers were empty, that long cords were coiled about the pack-saddle forks.

Instantly he drew the conclusion that Tamplin had been on his way after a new stock of grub. Clearly, his own assorted titbits looked good to the outlaws.

AFTER more irascible commands that kept Mossy Bollen on the jump, Beagle's grub was loaded into the panniers and all the horses led out into the open. Tamplin gave orders to mount. He had transferred Beagle's scabbard to his own saddle and himself rode a rigid guard on his former associate.

They crossed the creek and turned back up the gulch. Tamplin was impatient, more alert, seeming to have changed his first notion about a fire.

After only a mile, the gulch widened into a long flat, its open margins soft with meadow sod. Its middle was one vast jungle of willow brush and beaver dams.

To avoid this obstacle, the trail slanted up the right-hand slope. Two hundred yards up its first steep pitch, the group halted on a small flat ledge.

"Here's where we eat," Tamplin announced. "Take the hosses, Mossy. Tie 'em short, then rustle some wood. Twister, dang yuh, yuh can get that fire goin' now. Me, I'm settin' down here to see that yuh step easy and mind yore eyes."

Tamplin eased himself to a boulder, spinning his belt gun pointedly on a finger. Beagle set about his task, careful to make no sudden moves. The idea suited him. The outlaws could be no hungrier than he was.

But he also realized that he was in a tough spot, and if he were to get out of it that it would be up to him alone. For before starting out on this venture to earn his freedom, Beagle not only had had difficulty in convincing Harv Ryland that it would be suicide for two lawmen to come together, but in their last talk, he had made the sheriff promise not to come to his aid.

"If I get Wolf Tamplin, I'll bring him back," Beagle had said. "If I don't come back, just mark Tamplin up with another killin' and let it go at that."

Now Beagle was wondering. Suppose he didn't get back? Would Harv Ryland be-

lieve he had died doing his duty? And even if Ryland himself did believe that, how many of the county's voters would argue that the sheriff had simply allowed a prisoner to slip through his fingers? But Harv Ryland must have realized the gamble he was taking!

At first, Beagle had pictured two alternatives—either to bring Tamplin back, or die trying. Now he saw other angles to his problem. And he also considered his situation and his present surroundings.

Years before, Redhorse Gulch had teemed for a brief interval with gold mining activities. Up at its head, where a bald mountain wall bocked it off, had been the thriving town of Deadend. On up the face of this steep wall, above timberline on rocky switchback trails long since impassable, were the shafts, tunnels and shell-like housings which had made the town possible.

All this was stripped and lifeless now. Deadend was not even a ghost city, for no more than two structures were left to tell the story of its rampaging past.

One of these was the hewn log cabin in which Wolf Tamplin made his hideout home. The other was the best-built structure of which that now forgotten city had boasted—its jail. A squat cubicle of great stone blocks, with a door made from discarded wagon tires, straightened, meshed together and rudely welded, the ancient calaboose had still been usable the last time Beagle had seen it.

He was not fooling himself. He was Tamplin's prisoner, despite the big outlaw's show of good feeling. In truth, it was from Tamplin's gloating eyes that Beagle got his first hint that he was headed for the old jail—unless he could see his way to rejoin Tamplin on the owlhoot trail.

Which would be worse—to go to State prison, or to be Wolf Tamplin's captive behind the bars of that dismal relic among the ghosts of a forgotten city?

"When did yuh eat last, Twister?" Tamplin queried.

Beagle, having cut steaks from the loins of the deer, under Tamplin's instructions, was broiling them over the fire. He was meeting his captor's half-mocking banter cheerfully.

"Me, I've been livin' good, Tamplin. Say, if I ain't forgot, yuh like yore meat pretty well burnt. Is that right?"

Tamplin laughed. Beagle got the broiling steaks adjusted and stood up to rub the smoke from his eyes. As he stepped a little out from the fire, Tamplin swung warily to face him. The powerful outlaw held a snorting contempt for the idea that any one man could take him prisoner.

"I've camped here before, Twister," he said. "This shelf we're on is part of the old ore road of forty year ago. Tip-top lookout, ain't it? Me and you, Twister, could stand off a dozen lawhounds here. Me, I could hold three-four lawdogs right here—make 'em work for me." Tamplin laughed.

THE campfire was built near to the uprising cut of the old road. The shelf's outer edge dropped off in a sheer cliff which extended for fifty yards in either direction. Beagle walked to the cliff edge and stood overlooking the wide creek bottom.

It was one of those fair sights which look good to a man who faces death. A few yards out from the cliff face, a dozen fir trees sent up their sleek tapers from below. As Beagle looked down into their tops, a morbid memory came to him. Only a few years ago, he had been a gay-hearted boy, prospecting for crow eggs, for young squirrels, or just climbing trees for the sheer joy of it. Before he had lost his parents, and had been forced to strike out on his own, working for folks who didn't trust him when it came to a showdown. He was rudely roused from this moment of reverie. Like an evil shadow, Wolf Tamplin had moved up behind him, to jab him playfully in the ribs with his gun. He thrust his face down to Beagle's ear.

"Yuh couldn't work it, son," he chuckled sardonically. "It's a fifty-foot jump down there. Yuh'd bust yore neck."

Beagle glanced down, then up, in bewilderment.

"Gosh, Wolf, have yuh went loco? I'm just a-thinkin'. Listen, Wolf. If I was to join yuh again, if I was to give yuh my fair word, what would I get out of it?"

Sh-sh. Not so loud. Mossy's heard about yuh, and he's plumb jealous. He'd plug yuh in a minute if I'd let him."

Bollen was twenty yards down the grade, busy with the saddle cinches. Beagle again looked thoughtfully out into the treetops, then shrugged and returned to his fire. With his back to the grade cut, he squatted again to his cooking. Tamplin remained standing, facing him across the fire.

The outlaw had broken a boot lace. He lifted his foot to tug at the lace with both hands. From under his hat, Beagle could just

see Tamplin's legs and hands, his six-gun dangling on one finger by its trigger guard.

Quick as a chipmunk, Beagle leaped straight over the fire. He caught Tamplin under the raised knee, belting his shoulder against the man's big body. The body collision was badly aimed, but even so he heaved Tamplin up and tumbled him back. As the big outlaw's shoulders struck hard upon the ground he bawled an alarm to Bollen.

Beagle plunged on over him. With a running start to the cliff edge, he put all he had into a clean leap into that fifty feet of space.

The bend of his right arm fell true against one of the fir tops. The tree swayed violently, but held. Beagle's flying body whipped round to its off side, his legs falling astraddle of the tree's soft "bush."

Clutching limb ends with his hands, while lower limb ends swept up through the crotch of his legs, he slid swiftly down over the outflaring fir. The trick was not a difficult one. He had done it many times before, though never with such a pounding heart.

Tamplin quickly flopped over onto an elbow and fired twice into the fir. But so swift was Beagle's drop into the fir's soft bush, that both shots passed above him. After that, he was on the ground, hidden by the tree's base.

Concealed by other trees, Beagle whipped back under the cliff and there tried to listen, with his blood roaring in his ears. He heard an excited shout from Bollen, then the *plop-plop* of Bollen's belt gun.

Tamplin seemed to join Bollen, then both were shouting and firing together. Beagle decided that his threshing descent must have flushed some animal, or even bird, whose quick passage among the brush must have deceived Bollen.

CHAPTER III

The Wolf Turns Cat

TWIST BEAGLE listened for Tamplin's command, which would bring the outlaws below, to close in on him from two sides. To his surprise, he heard them running down the trail together, still on the trail of their false clue.

Beagle grinned widely. He skittered along the cliff the opposite way, rounded it, climbed the slope and crouched at the edge of the old ore road. Along it, he could see the campfire, the idle horses. He ran softly down past the fire to the horses and caught his rifle from its scabbard on Tamplin's saddle.

He even had time to find his belt and six-gun hidden under a stone, and still came the outlaws' voices from as far down as the creek level. He stepped back to the fire, got a venison chop and began tearing it with his teeth. Then he slipped down past the horses, hugging the cut side of the ruined ore road. At the brow of the road's steepest pitch, he ducked into a perpendicular wash and there finished his chop.

Presently the outlaws were returning up the trail, hurrying back for their horses.

"He's still in the brush under the cliff," Tamplin was panting. "Keep watchin', Mossy. If he tries for a break across that streak of meadow, we'll let him have it!

Beagle leaned out, presenting only his head and leveled rifle.

"So, that's the tune, Tamplin!" he jeered. "Let him have it right now if yuh feel like it."

Bollen showed his yellow streak. As both men halted, Mossy ducked behind Tamplin, his hand moving gunward. Beagle fanned the ears of both men with a single shot and Tamplin struck angrily back at Bollen with his empty hand.

"Bollen, I'll give yuh one more chance," Beagle called out. "The same goes for you, Wolf."

Wolf Tamplin spouted curses, but his hands went up.

"Bollen," Twist Beagle barked, "take the big boy's gun—from behind. That's right. Now drop it. Drop yore own alongside of it."

Mossy Bollen was good at taking orders, and when Beagle had ceased pouring them at him, Wolf Tamplin lay on the ground, well done up in packsaddle twine. Beagle moved him to the fire, with Bollen's help, after which he fitted a pair of short rope hobbles to Bollen's ankles. He searched both men and tied their belts, guns and rifles into a snug bundle.

"You like yore meat pretty well burnt, eh, Wolf?" Beagle grinned. "Well, it ought to do. We'll go on with our eatin' now."

"Cocky, ain't yuh?" Tamplin snarled. "But yuh ain't got us out of here yet."

"No. But the law's got a long reach,

Tamplin, and I'm on its side. Yore days are done."

"You know what I'd a-done," Bollen bitterly and meaningfully reminded the helpless Tamplin.

Twist Beagle had a problem on his hands. Only an hour remained of daylight and it was a two-day trek to Splitrock. He decided to stay where he was until morning, only moving down to the meadow where the horses could be staked to grass. With Bollen's aid, he accomplished the task without mishap.

The stars came out and the high, thin air turned bitter with frost. But there was plenty of wood which Beagle brought in between his intervals of restive pacing. Before the first hint of dawn, he had a huge breakfast cooked and again the ill-assorted trio ate, and drank hot coffee with gusto.

Then Beagle untied Bollen, down to his rope hobbles, and set him to readying the horses. He stowed all his grub into Tamplin's panniers. He next got Tamplin aboard, tied his feet under his horse's belly, then did the same for Bollen. He tied the right hand of each outlaw with a cord to the cinch ring.

"If yuh toe the line," Beagle proffered, "I'll mebbe do better by yuh, once we're clear of Redhoss."

He topped the pack-saddle with his tarp roll, the deer carcass, and the tight bundle of outlaw firearms. The pack-horse was a slow, waddling brute, and to that stolid animal, Beagle tailed the outlaw's mounts—three in a string.

AFTER a final careful survey of all details, he turned to his own horse. The animal was in high fettle and snorty with cold. As Beagle stepped into saddle, the horse cracked into a bucking fit. Beagle was prepared for this playful demonstration, but at that moment the loud, blood-chilling wail of a catamount shivered the still dawn.

The effect of the cry on Tamplin's pack-horse was electric. The loggy beast went wild. It snapped its tail tie and whipped the lead rope from Beagle's saddle-horn. From it, Beagle's mount took genuine fright and bolted into a high run.

He heard a raucous laugh, then from Tamplin's lungs again that mimic cry shook loose the canyon echoes. Both bolting horses headed—not down the canyon, but up it, toward the ghost of Deadend. Before Beagle could stop his mount, he had been carried half a mile.

By the time he had gained the upper hand and was returning, he met the pack-horse, which he had passed. At that first devilish cry from Tamplin, Beagle had seen the pack-horse, true to its native instincts, dash under the low branches of a tree. The deer, tarp roll and bundle of firearms all had been swept off.

"He must have been jumped by one of them cats when he was a Colt," Twist Beagle decided.

He touched steel to his mount and in a moment was again in sight of his prisoners. An end of the broken pack cord must have remained caught in the tree. Despite his handicaps, Tamplin had worked the outlaw mounts close enough to grasp the dangling pack cord and was at this moment drawing the bundle of guns up from the ground.

He got a turn of the cord about his saddle-horn, then swung the horses. After their first steps, they shied into a scared run with the tarp roll and deer carcass bounding crazily at their heels.

Even so, the horses were still tailed together and Beagle gained rapidly. Then Tamplin got a belt gun wrested free and managed to open fire, awkwardly. The play looked hopeless, yet some evil god smiled on the outlaw. One of his first shots took Beagle's horse in the shoulder.

He heard the drum of the heavy slug, heard it sheer off past his own head. Instantly he was kicking free of the saddle. His horse faltered, then somersaulted into a patch of brush.

Beagle got clear, but his horse lay limp with a broken neck. Tamplin waved back with a mocking hoot.

It was still possible to stop the outlaw with a couple of long shots, so Beagle ran and jerked his rifle from the tangled saddle.

Its beautiful slim, blue barrel was bent like a bow!

Twist Beagle just stood gulping in the half-dawn. Ten minutes before, he had been riding high to success; now he was afoot in the heart of Wolf Tamplin's territory, with only a belt gun and a hunting knife.

The outlaws were soon out of sight along the crooked brush line, but were sure to be after him the moment they could get themselves untied and organized.

Beagle clutched his ruined rifle and ran upcanyon toward the pack-horse. He easily caught the winded animal by its dragging lead rope, though the horse itself was no good

to him. He whipped the lightly loaded panniers from the saddle forks, tossed them into the willows and swung back to tie up the pack-horse. But as his glance lifted, he saw the outlaws pounding after him, already free of their ties.

He dropped the lead rope and ducked for the willows. The outlaws opened fire, their rifle steel biting and ripping the brush around him. The willows grew low and dense, bent and cannopied by blanketing snows. Beagle flattened, crawling along narrow beaver runs, dragging the canvas panniers after him. He quickly changed his course to avoid the boring lead, and soon could stop to listen.

The shooting ceased. The willow thicket was scarcely two hundred yards across, though several times that long. Beagle heard Tamplin shout at Bollen to stay where he was, then gallop down to where he could cross the creek and get around the willows.

Twist grinned.

"Go it, feller," he muttered. "The two of yuh'll have a sweet job huntin' me out of here."

He dropped the useless rifle and pushed on with the panniers. At least he had food.

THE soft ground grew marshier. He ran into bottomless ooze and trod along sodden logs. He climbed out on a big beaver dam half circled by water, and now could hear Tamplin calling across to Bollen from the far side. Gaining that end of the dam, Beagle hung his grub bags on a tree stub and pushed on for a sight of Tamplin.

As the sun climbed the sky, Wolf Tamplin's temper rose with it. For hours the outlaws shouted back and forth and pounded sod around the marshy jungle. For hours Beagle probed its bosky depths. The die was cast. It was now war to a finish.

Once he laid in wait, got a perfect shot at Tamplin—and missed. The spookiness of it made him shiver. But ten minutes later he was across the thicket, throwing a long shot at Bollen. Late in the afternoon, he failed in another fair shot at Tamplin and got his clothes gouged at the belt line by a rifle slug.

By these tactics, Beagle hoped to keep the outlaws on their horses until nightfall. He had dared not push the battle, since the moment they found he was reduced to a belt gun, they could close in on foot and whittle him down with rifle fire.

As night began to come, Beagle found near the beaver dam a freakish, waist-high table of dry, rocky ground, left by the wash of the creek which now flowed on its inner side. To this dry flat, he climbed with his panniers. The sky was clouding.

"Smells like rain." He shivered. "Wonder if I dare build a fire."

The bit of rock table was no larger than a band stand. A growth of fir which crowded against its high side opposite to the creek, insured its concealment. But as Beagle noted the low clouds, he saw they would reflect light like a ceiling.

He ate smoked ham, cold, with dry biscuits. Then stowing all his grub into one pannier, he stuffed the other with small dry wood, such as would burn without smoke.

For two miserable hours he hung in black darkness near the beaver dam, with only his ears to guard him. But now the beavers were out, playing and working with their winter food. Their stealthy noises, their splashings, the sudden spat of their broad tails, like pistol shots, set Twist's nerves on edge.

Shivering, craving action, he groped out to the meadow at the far side. If he could get one more fair chance with his six-gun! If he could once lay hold of Tamplin's fine mount! The outlaws must have some kind of camp. Their horses had to eat, and so did they.

As he paused out in the still meadow, a low snarling and spitting sound came persistently to Beagle's ears. He wondered—had some young cats found the deer? Why hadn't Tamplin made sure of that deer? What else would he have to eat? Or had Tamplin taken the pack-horse and gone on his way down the canyon?

Beagle recalled that he had instantly thrown himself to the ground at that last close call from Tamplin's rifle shot, and had stayed hidden ever since. Likely enough, Tamplin thought he had finished him. Maybe the outlaws had gone back to their cabin.

To these questions, Beagle aimed to have the answer, by daylight, or sooner. His first concern was to find if the outlaws were camped here for the night.

He moved like a slow shadow until he had circled the whole upper half of the willows, then on down past his camp of the night before. At the thicket's lower end, he found his tarp roll, badly snagged, just where the outlaws must have stopped to get themselves untied. The mountain cats were gone. So

was the deer. The night was blank and still—no sign here of any camp or horses.

Beagle held out his hands, muttering in dismay. It was snowing! Snow would cover all sign. And yet, after all, maybe a good snow was a good thing. It might point to one sure bet—Tamplin's cabin at Deadend!

"By glory," Beagle reflected grimly, "I'll grab the iron by its hot end!"

He had his tarp roll, a little grub, and his legs to get him to Deadend. After that, he would have to depend on his belt gun, a knife!

CHAPTER IV

The Law's Long Reach

SHOULDERING his tarp roll, Twist Beagle carried it far enough to conceal it within the willow thicket, then kept on until he had completed a full circuit of the jungle. Still there was no sign nor sound. In the snowy darkness, he could not find where he had left the willows. Two inches of snow lay on the meadow and Beagle shivered with cold and hunger when the light of another day showed him the way back to the beaver dam.

To his vast relief, he found the panniers just as he had left them. He shook them free of snow and hauled out the first grub that came to his hand. It was a can of pork and beans, and it brought a grin to Beagle's face. He felt better—as if Harv Ryland was still remembering him. Now if Ryland could just reach out and hand him another horse, a rifle, he would be all set.

Without hesitation now, Beagle laid his can of pork and beans on the ground, covered it with small wood and set the wood afire. It was still snowing, so smoke would not show, even if there were anyone to see it.

With numb fingers, he groped for the empty can he had saved for heating water. There on his heels, he abruptly froze as something poked him solidly from behind. A shivering snarl held him still.

"Ef yuh move a muscle, I'll blow yuh in two! Hey, Mossy, come a-runnin'. I got the slippery devil."

Over his shoulder, Beagle could glimpse Wolf Tamplin's head and shoulders thrusting out of the firs above the rock table edge. He swore fervently at his own faulty reasoning.

"Unbuckle yore belt!" Tamplin's ugly tone brooked no delay and Beagle complied.

Tamplin caught the belt on the muzzle of his prodding rifle and drew it toward him. Mossy emerged from the creek side.

"Why don't yuh blast him, boss?" he complained.

"Blast nothin'. Blastin's too good." Tamplin pushed round out of the firs and swung up onto the table. "Mossy, yuh mind the old jail at Deadend? That's where I'm takin' this jasper. Goin' to make a pet out of him. I'll learn him."

Tamplin was a sight—covered with mud, drenched below the waist, blue and quaking with cold. In the face of his vile temper, Beagle was not sure of his next breath. The outlaws must have begun stalking him at nightfall. And Beagle realized that hunger must have driven them to it.

"I'll teach you and any lawhounds that sent yuh, yuh can't monkey with Wolf Tamplin! Them beavers—why, they told me plain as paint where to look for yuh. I knew yore grub wouldn't be far. Yuh see how close I come to it." Tamplin turned and stormed at Beagle, "Cuss yuh, what yuh waitin' on? Hustle up that fire, Mossy. Bring up some dry wood, then we'll hog-tie this rep-tile."

Still on his heels, not daring to rise, Beagle began to lay wood on the fire. Tamplin backed out to the table edge and hung his rifle high in a tree crotch. With his own belt gun in one hand and Beagle's in the other, he tumbled a squarish rock close up to the fire with his feet and hunkered down upon it, opposite Beagle.

"What yuh got to heat water in?" he demanded. "Get out that coffee."

Beagle found the cloth bag of coffee.

"Yuh had a fryin' pan, Wolf," he said. "I reckon it got lost. I—"

He seemed to stammer with eagerness to please. Actually, he was seeing a chance for himself, a thin and fearful one, but a chance. He prayed that Mossy wouldn't come for another two minutes. Three minutes!

He laid the last of his own wood on the fire, found the empty tin he had been hunting. He turned a block of stone close against the fire.

"What's that for?" Tamplin roared in instant suspicion.

But he subsided when Twist placed the

empty tin in readiness upon the stone. He shouted loudly at Mossy. Mossy came. He clambered up, flung down his wood and squatted over the fire, teeth chattering like castinets.

"Don't be settin'," Tamplin raged. "Take this feller's belt—there it lays—and tie his legs, while I—"

With a thunderous clap, the fire exploded like a volcano. Beagle, crouched behind his rock, saw Tamplin's hat fly back, his face blotted out in a blast of flame and ashes. Beagle uncoiled, diving twice his length sideward. Tamplin's two guns cut loose like an echo. Bollen had tumbled straight backward, off his heels. Beagle saw him scramble half up, clawing for his gun.

TWIST was dodging round the runty Bollen, aiming to make a jump for the willows, when Bollen abruptly went slack and again fell back, his six-gun tumbling behind him. In one long, springy glide, Beagle whipped in behind him, scooped up Bollen's gun and swung it against Tamplin's bare head.

Tamplin's hands flew limply up and he collapsed backward onto Beagle's feet. Twist looked down into the big outlaw's face. It was plastered thick with a steaming brown paste peppered with ashes. Beagle drew a shaky breath, and laughed insanely.

Bollen lay groaning. One of Tamplin's blind shots had hit Bollen.

When Tamplin opened his eyes, Beagle was pouring water over his blistered face, washing it clean. The outlaw was snugly trussed in his own belts and those of Bollen. Bollen didn't need any tying.

"I knew yuh was up to somethin'," Tamplin growled.

"I saw yuh did," said Beagle. "But the beavers didn't tell yuh I had a can of beans in that fire. That's a trick yuh mebbe never learnt, Tamplin. The sheriff, he put me onto it. Yuh can heat yore can pronto, that way, and with mighty little fire. But it's worse than a steam boiler. It'll blow yuh to Kingdom Come if yuh don't watch it. Yuh wouldn't blame me for pushin' that rock up in front of me, would yuh, Tamplin?"

* * * * *

More than twenty-four hours of almost steady riding lay behind Twist Beagle and now he was plodding over open and rolling rangeland. Still he was not tired, nor aware of any hunger. In truth, this was the sweetest morning Beagle had ever known.

He was riding Wolf Tamplin's blooded bay gelding. Tamplin rode at his left on Mossy Bollen's wabbling cowpony, while the body of Bollen rode the logy pack-animal along with Beagle's snagged tarp roll.

Days of preparation had been necessary before Twist Beagle had proposed to Sheriff Ryland that he go alone to Redhorse Gulch, days in which he and the sheriff had spent hours in the little restaurant booth, eating, planning, talking. Good days!

Then one night the sheriff had come alone to the restaurant.

"He's gone, Milly," he had said. "Got started before moonrise." The worried look in Harv Ryland's eyes had then given place to a mischievous twinkle. "Reckon it's time I was makin' good, eh, Milly?"

He had gravely hauled a great sheaf of bills from his pocket. It must have looked like a million dollars to Milly.

"Gosh, I didn't realize how smiles can count up," the sheriff had complained. "I plumb lost track. Did you keep tally, Milly?"

"Harv Ryland—will you get out with that money?" Milly had spoken spiritedly. "Do you take me for a Judas? All you and I can

[*Turn page*]

Can't Keep Grandma In Her Chair

She's as Lively as a Youngster—Now her Backache is better

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

do now is pray that he'll get back. . . ."

Twist Beagle knew nothing of that, but he was getting back.

Two hours ahead lay Splitrock. Straining his eyes in that direction as he rode, at length he made out the silhouette of a horseman on the jutting step of a commanding mesa. As he suspected, the figure turned out to be that of Harv Ryland, watching for him. A half-hour later, Ryland pounded up on a lathered horse, wearing a grin so wide he could scarcely speak.

"Darn, Twist—yuh've t r a d e d hosses! Traded a dead one for a live one, I bet!"

"Sheriff—er—Ryland, m e e t Mr.—er—Tamplin," Twist Beagle managed to say. "Old friend of mine, sort of."

Wolf Tamplin was not a good loser. He nodded sourly.

As they pulled into Splitrock, Beagle was for skirting the town's business section on their way to the jail. But Harv Ryland wouldn't have it so. He led the dusty dead and living riders straight through Main Street.

"Yuh can give Tamplin yore old cell," the sheriff whispered to Twist Beagle. "Yuh're done with it."

When they came out of the jail, the sheriff flung up a hand to greet the gathering crowd. Clamor broke out.

"Gosh, Twist," he said, "we'll have to climb our hosses or we'll never make it uptown. I bet yuh could eat!"

AS THEY dropped rein at the restaurant and went inside, Ryland was still chattering happily.

"Pretty near everybody in town has got a bet laid. All the papers got wind of our deal, and have I had an airing! I practically been livin' on that mesa point the last three days. About the time yuh showed up, the rewards offered for Tamplin had got so rusty I couldn't say much about 'em. But all this yellin' by the newspapers give me a dandy chance to get 'em polished up. Fact is, Twist, the bounty yuh'll get has been boosted more'n a thousand dollars."

The sheriff and Twist Beagle again took their places in the private booth.

Ryland turned to look toward the kitchen door.

"Nobody home, looks like."

"How could they be—you ridin' down Main Street like yuh done? Everybody stampeded to the jail. There's Milly, now."

Milly popped in. She was flushed and breathless.

"Milly," said Ryland, "meet the new deputy sheriff. He'll be on steady from now on. Twist, what yuh goin' to have? No pork and beans for breakfast."

"If you ever say pork and beans to me again—but wait till I tell yuh! Milly, he thinks I caught Wolf Tamplin. Well, it wasn't me—it was Harv Ryland. Wait till I tell yuh about it."

Beagle looked up at Milly in a tired way.

"How would some ham and eggs go?" Milly said. "A double order? I'll cook them for you myself."

"Shore enough?" Twist Beagle brightened. "I couldn't think of anything better. Make it ham and eggs."

"Make it two," said Harv Ryland.

"Yuh May Be the Law Around Here—but I Can Sure Beat Yuh to the Draw!"

THAT was the defiant answer of Texas Ranger Walt Slade when the boss of Bastville tried to give him orders. The Ranger, known far and wide as El Halcon, the Hawk, had ridden into the roaring oil town in order to smash a feud—and the two grim black guns he wore were his only deputies.

Walt Slade is at his fighting best as he faces the toughest foes he's ever met—in LEAD AND FLAME, the smashing complete novel by Bradford Scott featured in next month's issue.

Look forward to LEAD AND FLAME—it's a humdinger that races from start to finish with action thrills in every paragraph!

The killer came on in a snarling rush, knife in hand

A SHERIFF FOR BREAKFAST

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

Young Deputy Frank Wayne doesn't pack irons—but he tries a plumb scarey weapon when some quick action's needed!

WHEN the Law walked down the street of Silver Mesa, folks turned around and looked. Lean, straight, gangling and vigorous Matt Starbuck packed the star. Grave and serene of manner, nodding to a rancher here and a townsman there, lifting his hat to a lady, he struck you as being more fitted to be a preacher than a lawman—until you noticed the uncommon alertness of his eyes.

Young Frank Wayne wore the deputy's badge. Siding Matt, he strove to match the lawman's stride and dignity, and somehow he succeeded in both. Maybe that was because seventeen-year-old Frank was built rangy too, with shaggy red hair escaping from under his cover, and had the easy, stalking gait of a mountain lion.

Most folks looked on, and admired. But there was no admiration in the two pairs of

eyes that peered through slits in the curtain of a window up in the Drover's Hotel.

The room was in semi-darkness. One of its occupants, a big man, not bothering to make any show of affability now, ran his fingers along the heavy gold watch chain that crossed the expanse of his vest.

"Your customer, Bunnell," he said to his companion.

"Gila" Bunnell squinted. "Shucks," he said, "I eat that kind for breakfast!"

Then he drew back, darted searching glances over his shoulders. That was instinctive with him, by now; an eternal guarding against attack from an unexpected quarter. The scars on his dark face showed how he had come by his alertness.

His mouth quirked down at one corner, in satisfaction.

"I'll take half of yore five hundred now, Torson," he said.

The fat man pursed his lips, regarded the killer with slitted eyes, then pulled out a roll and peeled off some bills.

"Don't let the looks of that old buck fool you," he warned sharply. "He's a tough one."

"Hah!" Gila laughed shortly. "Only one of him, ain't there? Would yuh take a look at what he's got for a deputy? A ganglin' button, hardly dry behind the ears!"

"That button," Torson warned, "worships the ground Starbuck walks on. Seems the sheriff, though he wasn't old enough himself to be the kid's father, took the button under his wing, after the kid's dad, a miner by the name of Wayne, got killed. Wayne had made his spring clean-up and was bringing a wagonload of high-test in, when he was jumped by hold-ups. He shot his way out. But they took after him, and on the canyon road his lead team missed their footing, and the wagon and all went down into the river.

"Wayne's body never was found, but the kid—he was along—was fished out below the rapids, more dead than alive. Starbuck sent him to the doctor at Prairie City, had him fixed up, stood the cost. And gave him that deputy job when the kid was well. He doesn't let the kid carry a gun, yet. But I want you to watch out, Bunnell. I want no slip-up here."

"Hah!" Bunnell's humor had a vicious edge to it. "Didn't have yore pudgy little paw in that holdup did yuh, Torson?"

THE big man's eyes glittered in the half-dark.

"I am not dealing penny-ante here, Gila," he said coldly. "There's a flaw in the title to every bit of property in this county—goes back to a Spanish grant. When I get certain changes made in the records in the courthouse I'll be king pin here. But that accursed lawman suspects something. He has blocked me, warned me to get out. And there'll be others, miners and ranchers, who'll be stubborn about it. More work for you there, Gila. Right now your business is to get Starbuck out of my way."

"Cold-blooded fish, ain't yuh?" Bunnell inquired, swinging his squat body around.

"I watch out for my interests." Torson's glance flicked down, appraised the low-slung, flashy engraved twin guns that glinted in Gila's open holsters. "From the looks of your hardware, I'd say you were capable of handling your end of the deal."

Bunnell shot nervous glances over his shoulders, slapped the ornate carved grips of his irons, laughed harshly.

"They've fooled more'n one hombre," he commented. "He gets it stuck crosswise in his *cabeza* that I'm goin' to use 'em, and he ain't lookin' for a knife. Which is quick, and certain, and a heap quieter. Better have that other two-fifty ready for me in the mornin'. With a bonus. . . ."

Eyes slitted against the glare of the afternoon sun, Gila Bunnell stepped out into the street of Silver Mesa. He stuck a cigar into his wide mouth, crossed the street with puffs of dust eddying around his boots, then clumped down the board sidewalk on the other side, spurs jingling loudly.

Gila aimed to get noticed.

And he was. He had passed the sheriff's office and was turning around down at the end of the street, in front of a ramshackle building in which a Chinese toiled over steaming laundry tubs, when he saw Silver Mesa's lawmen step out onto the boards and head his way.

He waited for them there, slowly puffing his cigar as his slitted, evil eyes took measure of the man he meant to kill.

"Howdy, stranger," the sheriff said. "Aimin' to stay in town long?"

"That depends," Gila retorted, inwardly sneering at this stately, kindly-acting old fool who packed the star.

"Well, check yore hardware at the first bar yuh come to," Starbuck said, a note of authority creeping into his voice. "We aim to keep a peaceable town."

"So I notice. Even yore *segundo*, there, ain't packin' iron."

"Frank is learnin' to be a lawman," informed Starbuck. "Soon as he learns to sling an iron a little better than the best of 'em—and when *not* to sling one—he'll buckle on a gun. Not before."

Bunnell swung his amused regard upon the button. The red-headed ranny had freckles. Though nearly as tall as the sheriff, he had a lot of filling out yet to do. But the level, intent, piercing gaze that he leveled upon the killer made Gila vaguely uncomfortable.

It seemed a thing beyond the younker's years. It was as if the suffering he had gone through, plus the loss of his father, had piled on top of the calmness that was the result of his years in the mountain country, and given him the poise of a much older man.

Gila threw quick, jerky glances over his shoulders.

"Well, I—I'll find some place to hang my irons," he said lamely, and started across the street.

Over his shoulder, though, he saw the deputy pluck at the sheriff's arm. He saw Starbuck swing, look directly at the button. And saw young Wayne speak rapidly.

Bunnell couldn't hear what was said, because of a sudden clangor that came from the blacksmith shop just then. But he did see the deputy's lips frame the words "Wanted man," and "Reward notices."

Then he saw the two lawmen stride back to their office.

Suddenly taut, the killer meandered up the other side of the street, watching furtively. Through the dusty window of the jail office he saw the button yank open a desk and come up with a sheaf of papers that couldn't be anything but wanted notices.

The deputy thumbed through them, while the sheriff watched gravely.

Bunnell's teeth grated. That young button had spotted him.

It was a cinch there would be a notice there, with his picture on it.

This was a bad turn of the deal. Gila had the measure of his man, now, and had intended to let things ride until night, which was a better time for his style of doing things. In his way, Gila was careful.

But if that rangy sheriff chose to bust things out into the open right now, there was nothing Gila could do but make his play. Well, he would make it in his own way. A man had to choose his own time and place.

QUICKLY he sized up the town more closely, crossed the street again in the swirl of dust picked up by the arrival of the afternoon stage from Prairie City, and slid into the narrow space between the saloon and the saddlemaker's shop. He waded through drifts of tumbleweeds. Broken bottles grated under his boots.

But he moved with catlike quickness, reached the narrow alley, dodged along it toward where it ended, blocked off by the Chinese laundry, a long ramshackle building thrusting far back across the alley and reaching to the rear of the line of shacks on the next cowpath street. Drying clothes, painted crimson now by the sunset, hung from a crisscross maze of wires up on the laundry's flat roof.

And in the little space formed by an ell of the meandering building, Gila Bunnell found just what he wanted.

The Chinese, it looked like, had started to build himself a woodshed. He had thrown up a couple of walls, forming a rectangle maybe ten by fifteen feet tucked against the main building. There was a yawning doorway, but before he got around to a roof, seemed like, he had changed his Oriental mind, and now used the place to store empty boxes and such.

Bunnell threw his quick, uneasy glances over his shoulders, then peered into the deep shadows that filled the place. He bit deep into his cigar in satisfaction.

There was just one spot in the cluttered, roofless shed where a man could get cover and yet have room to swing irons when showdown came. That was back at the rear, up against the wall, behind some big boxes.

To the sheriff, following the plain trail of tracks and cigar smoke which Gila had left, it would seem that the killer had run himself right into a trap, and would be back there behind those boxes, hands taut on the grips of his guns.

Good enough. Gila eased into the shed, slid sideward behind some boxes that were right next to the doorway. There was hardly room to wedge his squat body into the space, hardly room to breathe, certainly no room to move around.

But it didn't take much moving for him to shake the knife out of the sheath that was strapped to his forearm, under the sleeve.

He didn't have long to wait. Quick, firm footsteps sounded in the alley.

"Bunnell!" the sheriff's firm voice rapped out. "Gila Bunnell! Shuck yore irons and

come out of there, hombre. We got yore number. That deputy of mine, he's been spendin' a lot of time studyin' reward dodgers. He remembered seein' yore face on one. I'm givin' yuh ten seconds to come out of there. Then I'm comin' in after yuh!"

"Come a-shootin', lawman!" Gila Bunnell spat viciously, knowing that his voice would bounce off the back wall of the shed and make it seem that he was back there.

He heard Starbuck prowl nearer, heard the whisper of metal against leather as the sheriff drew his iron.

Gila scowled. Only one of the lawmen out there. Had the sheriff left his down-chinned deputy behind to keep him out of danger? Gila decided that must be it, and smirked with contempt.

Taut as a fiddlestring now, with a rivulet of sweat coursing down his scarred face as he waited, Gila heard a faint scuffing sound up overhead. Must be the washing up there, stirring in the breeze, he decided. Though there hadn't been any breeze a minute ago.

Too late to worry about that, now. The rangy sheriff, moving slowly and with a sort of grim watchfulness, entered the roofless shed. Bunnell crouched deeper into the covering shadows, watched.

The sheriff's face was hawklike and forbidding. His intent eyes glinted a little, under their shaggy brows, as he appraised the setup. Then he moved forward again.

Bunnell let out a little breath. The sheriff had fixed his eyes upon that one likely hiding place at the rear of the shed, was heading toward it. Everything was working along as smooth as silk.

The killer stirred into snakelike, gliding motion, started to ease out of his concealment with his eyes upon the sheriff's back and his hand slowly lifting the knife.

Then—*crash!*

It sounded like the thunder of doom, breaking out just above and behind Bunnell's head. A reverberating roar of sound that could mean only one thing. Danger!

GILA'S reaction was instinctive. Crouching, he shot a glance backward and upward, over his shoulder. With horrified eyes he saw that it was only that sheriff's button, up there on the roof of the laundry building, banging an empty washtub!

The killer swore in sudden fury, whipped his glance back to the sheriff. But he was a little late. His quick, startled movement had jarred the pile of boxes that had furnished him concealment, and they were toppling over, striking the ground at the sheriff's side.

One of them struck the lawman's leg. And the lawman, paying no attention at all to the ruckus overhead, whipped around.

Bunnell threw everything he had into a snarling rush, swung his knife in a vicious arc. But the lawman was a shade the quicker. Bunnell saw the long barrel of the sheriff's six glint faintly in the dimness, just before it crashed against the side of his head.

The world exploded into blinding light that flared unbearably, then burned itself away and left only darkness. . . .

Gila Bunnell was stretched out on a cot, with a head that felt as if it were inhabited by swarms of angry hornets, when he finally came around. The cell door had just clanged shut—the noise of that must have been what had jarred him awake.

A little, bearded old cuss with a black bag in his hand had just gone out of the cell, and that red-headed younker deputy was twisting a key in the lock.

The sheriff sat at his desk, thumbing through papers under the light of an oil lamp. Gila saw him look up as the little man and the young deputy approached.

"Nothing to worry about, Matt," the whiskered old-timer with the black bag snapped testily. "You didn't crack that thick skull of his. Though why you should worry about it I don't savvy."

Starbuck thumbed back his hat and smiled.

"Why, thanks, Doc," he said, "for yore trouble. Wouldn't want nothin' to happen to this jasper while he's in my custody. Accordin' to these wanted notices, he's due to stretch twine over in New Mex. Good night, Doc."

The doctor went out, and Gila Bunnell, stung by sudden terror, jumped off his cot, grabbed the bars of his ceil door, rattled it.

"Look here, Sheriff!" he spat. "Yuh got no call to hold me! Yuh can't! I got a friend in this here town that'll—"

"I know," the sheriff said, slipping a packet of currency carefully into the drawer of his desk. "Name of Torson. This is the *dinero* he hired yuh with. I figgered he'd try bringin' in an hombre of yore stamp, so I had the banker mark all money Torson drawed out. Now I got the evidence I need, you havin' tried to knife me while yuh had the marked *dinero* in yore pocket. I'm on my way to bring in Torson . . . Deputy, keep watch on

this sidewinder."

When the sheriff had gone, Bunnell's squat body sagged in despair. But he glared at the red-headed young deputy. "If I ever get my hands on yore scrawny neck—" he began.

The freckled mountain younker grinned. "Ain't likely, mister, so settle back there. And if yuh ever do get loose," he added proudly, "next time yuh'll find me packin' iron! Matt said that after the way I helped him out tonight, I can spend my next pay for a six-gun."

"Yore own idea, was it?" Bunnell snarled. "Cuss yore hide! I thought the buildin' was fallin' over on me, or somethin'! But I still don't see why it didn't worry that crowbait sheriff any a-tall!"

The deputy grinned. "I'd noticed yuh was plumb wary about somethin' takin' yuh by surprise from behind. So when I crawled up onto that roof, and seen you fixin' to jump Matt from behind, I just figgered to upset yuh a little. Knew it wouldn't startle Matt none. Yuh see, he's pretty sharp about readin' people's lips, and such, so mighty few hombres know that Matt is stone deaf!"

"Don't budge or I'll blow yuh to Tophet!" boomed an angry voice as

A Swap and Whopper Novelet

COWBOY

CHAPTER I

Big Joe Dime

TO LOOK at the map one would think that Coast Highway 101 clings closely to the Oregon Coast. But at intervals between road and sea are deep coves and rugged headlands, steep and densely timbered. They form a chain of tangled, fog-dripping wilds that the hurrying traveler never sees.

This isn't range country. So the two riders jogging north, and who plainly were cowpunchers, or had been, seemed strangely out of place.

"Swap" Bottle, plump and pumpkin-faced, and "Whopper" Whaley, lean, long-nosed

The Wandering Waddies Face a Fate Worse

the goat butted at Swap's round middle and Whopper rubbed his aching nose

COMEDOWN

By SYL MacDOWELL

and lazy were continuing a long career of loafing into a summer in the green Northwest. They were broke, as usual, a condition that fretted little Swap who had occasional short bursts of ambition.

"I bet they need hombres like us in the Forest Service," he mused.

"Work and us don't git along, remember," warned Whopper. "It's a mighty hard way to make money."

"But lookout jobs ain't work."

"What's a lookout?"

"A feller that gits paid to set in a little house on some high mountain peak, enjoy the scenery and report forest fires, if any."

"Forest fires, there's the catch! Don't tell me that fire fightin' ain't work!"

"Rangers, guards and special-trained

than Death – Plenty of Good Hard Work!

crews fight fires. Lookouts just set, Whopper."

"Well, it sounds all right," Whopper agreed doubtfully. "S'pose the two of us take one job. Then one of us kin look whilst the other rests up."

"Might be arranged."

"And speakin' of rest, I could use a heap of it right now. We've rode a long ways. My saddle callouses need retreadin'. Hullo, here's a little side trail. Wonder where at it goes? S'posin we make looksee for a campspot."

They angled from the pavement onto the narrow, overgrown trail that dipped through a wet twilight of undergrowth—sword fern, laurel, myrtlewood and pink, blooming azaleas. They descended Indian file under tow-

SWAP

ering, mossy spruce, fir and cedar. All at once it brought them to an open, grassy glade beside a flowing spring.

IT WAS attractive, almost enchanting. It was so near the beach that they could hear the murmur of the surf, but sheltered from the sharp sea wind by a long sand dune.

The long-legged Whopper derricked himself down out of leather, flung his bony length on the sloping dry sand of the dune and heaved a weary sigh.

"This suits me just fine," he mumbled, closing his eyes and locking his fingers under his head. "What we got to eat, pardner?"

"We're about to the bottom of our saddle bags for grub. Just some dried soup mix and chawin' terbaccer."

"Well then, pass me the plugcut. Whilst you start a fire and boil up a pot of soup."

"Need milk for this brand of soup. We're plum out of tin-can milk."

Whopper groaned and sat up.

"Why didn't yuh think of that sooner?"

"I did. But you spent our last dime for this chawin' terbaccer," Swap said ruefully as he tossed the plug to his pardner.

Whopper thoughtfully fanged a snaggle-toothed hunk and rolled it into a bulge inside one hollow, stubbly cheek. Sometimes a chew was a consolation that smoothed over difficulties.

Then he eased back again and tilted his hat over his face.

Results followed almost immediately.

Down the side of the dune, sand sifted like a miniature landslide which almost buried him before he could scramble up to paw the fine, gritty particles out of his ears and neck.

Then he looked up. On the crest of the dune, its matted hair fluttering in the wind, stood a goat calmly chewing a hunk of browse.

Whopper chewed back at it as each inspected the other for a long, critical moment.

Then Whopper suddenly brightened.

"Swap, git yore throw-rope," he said in an undertone.

"For why?"

"For to lasso that goat, of course."

"I plumb refuse to cook a goat."

"We ain't going to cook it, yuh knothead. Can't yuh see that's a nanny-goat? We'll milk her. Then we'll have soup, savvy?"

"I also refuse to milk a goat."

"Then I'll milk her. You rope her."

Swap still wasn't stuck on the idea. But he moved reluctantly to his horse, unrigged the lariat looped to his saddle swell and tossed out the coils with expert fingers.

The goat watched curiously, unaware that its freedom was in peril. It stood there, outlined against the sandy crest as Swap whirled a wide loop and let go.

It dropped just right. He heaved the rope tight.

In the next instant, with a blatting of alarm, the nanny-goat tumbled down the dune and was at Whopper's feet.

He grabbed her by the neck as she struggled to her feet.

"Now git a bucket," he sang out.

Swap produced a smoke-blackened can that had served them as a coffee pot at many a campfire, thrusting it into Whopper's reach.

"Now hang onto her ears," Whopper ordered.

Swap grabbed an ear in each hand as he knelt and murmured gentling words to the bewildered animal.

Whopper stood up and inspected the goat from all angles.

"Wish there was a stump handy to hoist her onto," he pondered.

"Seems like you ain't never milked a goat before," Swap commented.

"Well then, how'd you go about it?"

"Yuh milk goats from behind."

"All right, hang on," Whopper grunted as he stooped and reached.

THE GOAT struggled. Whopper fumbled, down on one elbow now.

The goat kicked, its hoof banging Whopper squarely on the end of his long, knobby nose. He dropped the can and grabbed at the hurt.

The goat lunged forward, butting hard at Swap's round middle. He went tumbling and landed on his back in the mud beside the spring.

Then boomed a voice, angry and explosive.

"Don't budge, neither one of you, or I'll blow yuh to Tophet!"

Whopper let go of his throbbing, bloody nose and craned around. Swap, saturated with cold ooze, blinked and stared.

On the crest of the dune, where they had first sighted the goat, stood a bearded giant of a man, squinting at them along the barrel of a heavy, old-fashioned rifle.

"I ketched you red-handed!" he roared. "And yuh'll pay or my name ain't Joe Dime. In these parts we string up goat rustlers."

He descended the side of the dune with great, sliding leaps. He whipped the lariat off the goat and flung the loop over Whopper's head and jerked him to his feet.

He threw the rope end at Swap.

"Now find a good, strong limb," he bellowed. "And swing yore pardner. When he's done kickin', I'll dangle you."

"No—No-o-o!" Swap cried out, dodging away from the rope end. "I couldn't hang my best friend. I jest couldn't!"

"Then you hang him first," the bearded giant ordered Bottle. "Then I'll hang you."

"Me hang Swap?" Whopper gasped, clawing at the rope about his neck. "No, I ain't no executioner. I do no hanging. You've got to hang me first. Then you hang Swap."

"That's the way it'll be then," said Dime.

CHAPTER II

Swing or Sweat

BIG JOE DIME was a tough citizen. His threat to string them up was no empty bluster, no crude, horrendous joke. The petrified pardners were sure of that as they got a good look at him now.

He was a hairy monster, bearded to the eyes, with little dirty-brown tufts growing out of his ears and nose and overhanging his blazing eyes. He was even bigger than he had seemed when he loomed on top of the dune. Swap, being disinclined to find a hangtree, Big Joe spotted one himself—a giant spruce with spreading, mossy branches. He hauled Whopper towards it at rope's end.

"D-don't act hasty, f-friend," Whopper gurgled pleadingly. "We—we wasn't rustling yore goat."

"We only aimed to milk her," wailed Swap.

"On account of we was hongry."

"And clean busted."

Mercy was not a part of Big Joe's makeup. But something in their plea made him pause. He eased a little on his rope hold, giving Whopper a chance to cough up his plugcut.

"You skulkers fond of goat's milk?" he rumbled.

"Th-they claim it's healthy," wheezed Whopper, without mentioning the ugly fact that trying to get some threatened to be exceedingly unhealthy for them.

"Healthy?" snorted Big Joe, banging his rifle butt to the ground. "Why, dag-blame yore thievin' hide, goat's milk made me what I am."

That was a questionable tribute, Whopper thought silently.

"When I landed in these here parts," their captor went on impressively, "I was a puny runt, down to only two hun'red eighty pounds. Look at me now."

They looked as he swelled his chest. He was certainly no thin, worn Dime, whatever he had been. Whopper, with feeble effort at a jest, tried to say something of the kind but Big Joe interrupted him.

"That ain't all. I'm master mind of the goat cheese industry. Got a factory over yonder hump."

Whopper had never heard of goat cheese.

But in times of stress, such as now, he was agile-witted. Evidently flattery was the key to Big Joe's better nature—if he had one.

"We crave to live long enough to sample a hunk of the famous Dime goat cheese, f-friend," he warbled. "In—in a way, that's what brung us here."

"Yeah? Did it?"

Big Joe was melting now, slowly. Like goat cheese on toast.

"Yuh see," Whopper went on, with hope pounding in him, "me, I'm sort of a cheese expert. Look at my hoss there, for instance. Cheese-colored roan, it is. Shows how plum fond I am of—"

"If you're a cheese expert," Big Joe broke in, "mebbe I can make use of you both."

"How?" yelped Swap.

They should have detected the cunning in the big man's eyes and have known that buying a new lease on life would be at a dear price. They knew it with his next words.

"By puttin' you to work."

Whopper, who had turned from white to red and purple in those frenzied moments now became sickly green.

"N-now don't let's go to extremes, M-mister Dime!" he begged. He regretted his glib lie about being a cheese expert. "I—I overstated myself a mite. We don't hanker for—for work. We—"

"Yup, that's what I'll do," Big Joe decided. "I'll l'arn you the cheese bizness. From the ground up."

He jerked the rope like a bell-cord, ordering Whopper to slip the noose from around his neck.

"We'll start in right now," he smirked. "Unsaddle and stake out yore hawses. From now on, you work for me."

"You ain't mentioned wages," Swap suggested.

"I didn't aim to," growled Big Joe. "Yore pay is the goat's milk you stole, or would of."

Further argument would have been rash. The pardners removed kaks and packs from the sweaty backs of the cheese-colored roan and Swap's fancy, two-toned bay-sorrel and tethered them in the tall grass.

"Now march," Big Joe grunted, poking the rifle snout at them.

He herded them back in the woods and after they had gone a few steps, Whopper protested feebly.

"Yuh said yore cheese factory was over yonder hump, M-mister Dime, in the other direction."

"We ain't workin' in the factory just yet, Skinny. Just you hold yore long, smooth tongue and I'll show you where."

THE NANNY goat that had been their undoing paraded after them. Other goats, popping out of nowhere, joined the procession—she-goats, billygoats and frolicking kids. They had a mischievous curiosity to see what was going to happen, it seemed.

The goats were not kept long in suspense. The pardners came all at once onto a big down tree—deadfall from a recent storm—for the branches were not yet wilted. It was of a variety known as Port Orford cedar. The long, smooth trunk was almost as thick through as the height of a man and across the base of it lay a two-man cross-cut saw.

"It takes cord wood to keep the boilers going in the Dime cheese factory," Big Joe told them with a wicked grin. "I told you I'd l'arn you from the ground up."

"Yuh—yuh mean we got tuh saw wood?" bleated Whopper.

"Sweat or swing," Big Joe retorted with grim terseness. "I give you yore pick, bein' a easy man to deal with."

The pardners exchanged stricken glances. Sawing a five-foot log was a far cry from an easeful job as forest lookout.

"When you git done with this, there's others," promised Big Joe. "Reckon I can keep you busy all summer."

Summerlong toil at the end of a saw! Whopper shuddered visibly at the dismal prospect. Vaguely he wondered if hanging mightn't be the better choice. Big Joe Dime climbed onto the big log, squatted and leaned the rifle across his knees.

"Sometimes my help tries to take French leave," he said with a sinister wink. "You can try if you like. It'll sharpen up my shootin' eye. Now grab hold o' them cross-cut handles and start makin' cheese—and sawdust."

"Wh-when do we eat?" groaned Whopper.

"Come sundown."

Whopper grasped a saw handle to keep him from collapsing.

"And wh-where do we sleep, Mister Dime?"

"On a nice, soft heap of sawdust. So the harder you work, the better yore bed. Make yore own bed and lay in it, that's my motto."

Neither Swap nor Whopper had much log-sawing experience. But at Big Joe's barked orders, they soon learned to pull, not

push on the long, deep-toothed blade. The rasping sweep of the saw was like the slow pendulum of a clock through an afternoon that they thought never would end.

They were ready to drop in their tracks when the eternal forest twilight deepened to dusk. They were hardly able to bring their bedrolls from the grassy blade, even at the prodding of Big Joe's gun muzzle. They spread clean, fragrant sawdust on flat ground while Big Joe shook out the kinks in Swap's rope to tie them together.

"That ain't necessary, M-mister Dime," Whopper breathed feebly. "We ain't fitten to travel. Just git us our supper."

They hadn't noticed that their workmaster had picked up their smudged coffee can, on their trip over beside the dune. He squatted and milked the now-docile nanny goat and handed the can to them, brimful.

"This all we git?" blubbered Whopper.

"Till breakfast."

"Then what?" Swap piped huskily.

"On a steady diet of goat's milk, with goat cheese on Sundays, mebbe yuh'll grow up man-size," Big Joe leered at them.

The little pardner's legs folded and he slumped onto his blankets.

"What day is this?" he asked shakily.

"Thursday."

"Then—then I don't figger we'll live tuh sample that famous Dime brand goat cheese," he sadly decided.

The pardners were too worn out to plot an escape. They were too weary and discouraged to talk much as they supped on their meager meal. Going on short rations while pursuing their idle, effortless roaming was one thing. All day toil and bobtailed diet of nothing but goat's milk was another.

SLEEP CAME as a blessed respite to their sorrowful spirits. Further gloom depressed them on awakening in their fog-shrouded green prison. The sea-borne chill penetrated their bones and work-stiffened muscles.

"Wonder how good a shot Mister Dime is?" Whopper said past his chattering gap-fronted teeth.

"These here backwoodsmen are apt to hit what they aim at," Swap shivered. "Here he comes now."

Big Joe loomed through the mist with a bucket of warm milk and smug satisfaction behind his matted whiskers.

"Three-four more cuts and you'll be done with this log," he announced cheerfully.

"Th-then we kin quit?" jabbered Swap and Whopper together.

"Then we move up the hill to another log."

The haze that surrounded them seeped inside their bodies to dim all hope as they quaffed their breakfast and returned to the saw. But when they moved up the hill to a new scene of labor, a spark of desperation came to Whopper's suffering spirit. Strangely enough, it was the fog that furnished the inspiration. Fog and the last nubbin of plug-cut that he possessed.

The log that awaited them was on a steep bank a few yards above the highway, which was overhung with a long, projecting branch. They still had Swap's throw-rope.

WHOPPER

"The idear is this," Whopper hissed in Swap's ear. "Toss a loop up there when Mister Dime ain't lookin. Keep ahold of the other end. Then we grab on and swing for it. With the fog bein' so thick, the rope'll swing us out of sight, savvy? We'll swing clean across the highway, drop, then lope for our hosses and skin out to the beach for a clean getaway, savvy?"

Swap hadn't always been enthusiastic about his lean pardner's wild schemes. But he had no criticism of this one. He liked goat's milk less than Whopper and disliked work almost as much.

They were on their first cut when Big Joe's vigil relaxed a little. Perched on the log, his shaggy head sank to his knees and he dozed lightly, no doubt soothed into slumber by the singsong of the saw.

This was the moment. Whopper kept the saw going while Swap swung a frantic loop. After three tries, the lariat caught and held on a knot on the high limb. He scuttled up to the log and scrambled onto it and reached a hand down to Whopper on the other side, hoisting him beside him.

At the halt of the saw-sound, Big Joe roused and stirred. He straightened and yawned. Midway in the yawn his mouth snapped shut like a bear-trap, as he saw his workers standing on the log, gripping the rope, ready for their swoop into space.

They launched themselves in that second of his awareness. They swished downward and outward, dangling together, praying wordlessly that the knot would hold and that the rope would stand the strain.

Big Joe Dime whooped noisily to his feet and whipped the rifle to his shoulder. It all happened fast. As fast as his moves and their own, and a whole lot more unexpected, a truck roared around a bend and came their way. They heard it before they saw it. Then a sharper, louder sound stabbed the rumbling exhaust. A hurriedly aimed slug ripped the rope, just above their heads.

It frayed. They spun. It snapped. They dropped just as the truck loomed under them.

It was a tank truck. They landed squarely on top of it, out of view of the driver who was wholly unaware of the fantastic drama being enacted in the sweeping mist above and behind him.

CHAPTER III

Shortage Shopper

PROMPTLY THE fast-moving truck whisked them out of sight before their howling, raging nemesis could reload and fire again. They clamped onto the rounded top of the tank body. It was slick and wet and if they hadn't possessed the trained leg-grip of born riders, they couldn't have clung to the perilous perch.

The road twisted, the passing scene a fantasy of fog and ghostly glimpses of trees. They yelled. But the roar of the truck drowned their cries. On they rode, dipping into a steep turn, zooming up an incline, rounding a bend and speeding down another gentle slope.

In such circumstances, distance could not be calculated. Cockleburring onto that slick-sided tank truck was all they could do and think about. After minutes that seemed like hours they were borne to a long grade. The truck slowed, dropped to lower gear and its speed was reduced to a crawl.

"Now—jump for it, Whopper!" Swap yipped.

They hit on a brushy bank and rolled. Dizzy, scared but unhurt except for the jolt and light scratches, they lurched erect.

"Well, we made it," panted Swap, picking up his hat and whacking it against a trembly leg.

"But our hosses—how far back yuh reckon they are? And how we going to git there?" puffed Whopper.

"Plumb lost my bearings," Swap admitted. "Looks like we got to wait till the fog lifts."

"Which might be weeks."

Swap leaned against an upright post beside the highway and thought it over.

"Only thing left to do is hoof it till we git somewhere," he decided.

"Which might be miles."

"Might. And it mightn't. Anyhow, we're free. So let's—"

Swap discovered then that his leaning post had a mailbox nailed to it. And just past the mailbox was a graveled turnoff. He rounded the post and peered at the mailbox. He yipped glad relief at what he saw there and read off the words:

Humbug Mountain
Guard Station

Besides the words was the pine-tree symbol of Government timberlands and the letters "USFS". Which meant United States Forest Service.

They whisked into the graveled turnoff and up steep wheeltracks to a bench bright with a flower garden, a patch of lawn, a flagstaff and taking shape behind it, in the fog-swirls, a neat-porched cottage with smoke curling up from a chimney.

"In coupla shakes I bet we'll have a lookout job," chattered Swap.

"And cawfee!" cried Whopper, hungrily sniffing an aroma that drifted from the house.

"Then money in our pockets," Swap gibbered gleefully.

The man in charge was getting breakfast over a hot wood range. He was youngish, clean-cut, his name was Cutshaw and he had a pair of keen gray eyes that inspect-

ed them sharply.

"Hullo! Sheepherders?"

"Cowpunchers, mister," Whopper answered stiffly.

"Sheep ain't in our line," Swap explained. "Goats neither," he added wryly.

"Is that flapjack batter in that there bowl?" asked Whopper as he warmed his hands beside the stove.

"Yep. Sour milk batter. Goat's milk."

The pardners gulped and felt their appetites slipping.

"Mebbe that's bacon in the skillet," hinted Whopper.

"Nope. Goat."

Whopper took a deep breath.

"Friend," he said solemnly, "I got a notion yuh're acquainted with a nearby party that calls hisself Big Joe Dime."

"Acquainted?" Cutshaw smiled. "Shucks, stranger, he's my—"

Two sharp rings on the telephone cut him off. He stepped to the wall phone and unhooked the receiver.

"Hullo. Oh, hullo there, Uncle Joe! What! What's that?"

The pardners collided in their rush for the back door!

A FINE rain was sifting down out of the endless gloom when Swap and Whopper regained the highway. It funneled from soggy hat brims in front of their faces and a drop clung to the end of Whopper's long, knobby nose.

"Mister Dime must be phoning around a general alarm," he moaned.

"Describin' us as coupla goat rustlers on the loose," Swap fumed.

"Like as not there'll be a posse out. The sheriff'll git us."

"If we're lucky and don't git shot on sight."

They trudged aimlessly along the shoulder of the highway for a few sad steps. Then Swap halted and faced his pardner.

"Best thing to do is give ourselves up. Jail is better'n this."

"Problem is to find the jail," Whopper said despairingly.

"We never had no such trouble before."

"We never had to hole up in jail to save our hides before."

"That's right." Swap nodded glumly. "Only times we got in jail was on account of somebody else's mistakes, not ours. Just one thing sticks in my craw. That is, if we're rustlers, I'd ruther be charged with rustling most anything else—except goats."

"Me too, pardner," agreed Whopper.

Since they didn't dare to turn back and couldn't remain indefinitely where they stood, they slogged ahead. They bowed their heads to the fine, driving rain and their boots soaked it up, squishing at each step. But they didn't go far before the hum of a nearing vehicle sounded behind them.

They stopped and turned, ready for an order to halt. But it didn't come, although the vehicle—it was a light, empty truck—slowed down and halted alongside of them. The head of a man with a broad mustache and a cigar poked out of the driver's position.

"Ride, boys?" he sang out cheerily.

This was an unexpected opportunity. The pardners capered across the wet pavement and sloshed into the seat beside the driver.

"Where you headin' for?" he asked sociably as the truck gathered speed.

"Jail," Swap grunted.

The man grinned unbelievingly.

"Yeah? That'd be up at Gold Beach. Stopping there myself. You boys live hereabouts?"

"Reckon we're due to locate for a spell," Whopper told him. "Unless there's a 'no vacancy' sign on the jail."

The man laughed. Perhaps he thought what Whopper said was a good example of dry humor for such a wet country.

"Maybe you boys can help me out," he said when he spoke again.

"Out of what?" asked Swap.

"A shortage."

"What's yore bizness, mister?"

"Just now, I'm a shingle scout."

"A what?"

"It's like this. I'm a contractor and I've built a flock of houses down in California. I've got the foundations, floors, sides and rafters—but no roofs on 'em. No roofs because there's no shingles. So I'm up here in Oregon, scouting around for shingles so I can finish and sell my houses. Shingle scout, get it? Know where I might pick up a load of shingles, boys?"

"No," said Whopper, slumping deep in the seat cushions and fixing a melancholy gaze ahead.

But he jerked erect and stared around as Swap spoke.

"Yes, mister," Swap said calmly. "Plenty shingles."

"That's fine!" declared the driver heartily, giving Swap a wallop on the back that brought a new shower of rain drops from his hat brim. "I'm stopping at Gold Beach, like I said. For breakfast. Suppose you boys join me and we'll talk things over."

Whopper brightened. He gave his little pardner a congratulatory nudge. But when they got out of the truck in front of the Gold Beach Inn, and followed their host to the dining room, he wondered how and where Swap intended to produce even one shingle, let alone a truckload.

A CHANCE to get their heads together was given when their host left them at table for the washroom. Swap leaned forward, tense and eager.

"It's thisaway, Whopper," he explained rapidly. "That Port Orford cedar we cut up for Mister Dime makes fine shingles. Seemed a shame at the time to make firewood out of such good, straight-grained wood without a knot in it. Anyhow, it's cut in just the right lengths to—"

"Hold on," interrupted Whopper. "We can't sell Mister Dime's wood. That'd land us in jail for keeps!"

"But this man needs shingles a heap sight worse'n Mister Dime needs wood for his cheese factory. There's a deal in it, somehow. If—"

"Look out—here he comes back!" warned Whopper.

"Then it's up to you to figger it out," Swap finished in a low, hurried voice. "You and yore imagination. Only don't lie any more'n yuh have to."

Their man seated himself briskly and reached for a menu.

"How about orange juice, toast and coffee, boys?" he suggested.

"Just fine, friend," beamed Whopper. "With a big steak, fried potatoes, scrambled aigs and a hunk of apple pie on the side. Lucky we met up with yuh when we did."

The man drummed his fingers on the table edge.

"It won't be lucky if you don't produce shingles," he said bluntly.

Swap held his breath as a dreamy, faraway look came into Whopper's eyes. That was a sign that his lean, hungry pardner was thinking about something even more important than food. And when Whopper Whaley put his wits to work, anything could happen.

"Friend," Whopper replied after an impressive pause, "yuh got nuthin' to worry about. Wait'll I show you. Not plain, ordinary milled shingles. Sumthin' a heap sight better."

"What d'you mean, better?"

"Split shakes. Genuine hand-split cedar shakes. Last a lifetime."

The man rubbed his hands together, his eyes shining.

"Say now, that's great!" he exclaimed. He made an impatient gesture to a waitress. "Where are they?"

Swap's hand rose fumblingly to his throat as Whopper serenely continued.

"Back the way we come from," Whopper said. "Other side of Humbug Mountain. Back yonder on the Dime cheese ranch."

Swap did not breakfast with relish. It seemed like the last meal of a doomed man. Whopper, he reflected, must have gone loco to propose a return to Big Joe and certain vengeance. But Whopper ate heartily, settling his meal with a last minute order of a slab of plugcut.

Their man, whose name turned out to be Bradsky, was fidgety to get going. Whopper dawdled, wrapped in thought.

Swap was thinking too, in worried foreboding. Even if they managed to get hold of Big Joe Dime's cut wood, who was going to split it into shakes? It was going to be a lot of work for somebody to split up a truckload of them.

Whopper finally got around to what he wanted to say.

"Here's how it is, Mister Bradsky," he announced. "Them shakes are in the hands of a gent who ain't anxious to part with 'em."

Bradsky scowled. His cigar tilted at a hostile angle.

"You let on that you had shakes for sale!" he growled. "What's the gag?"

"We're shakes brokers, friend, savvy?"

"You'll have something to shake about if you don't produce the goods, Hollowbelly! C'mon, let's get out of here."

Outside, they climbed back into the Bradsky truck. The rain had stopped, the fog was breaking and weak shafts of sunshine lifted steamy vapor from highway and dripping shrubbery as they started southward. The air was fragrant with the hothouse smell of growing things and rich earth. Swap was filled with a melancholy yearning for their horses. They never had been so far from them before.

They were abreast of the old-fashioned courthouse and jail when Whopper called out to the man at the wheel.

"Pull in there, Mister Bradsky."

"What for?" rasped Bradsky.

"Didn't we mention that we was headed for the jail?"

"Look here, what kind of a game is this?"

"It ain't no game, friend. It's bizness. And it won't take long. I aim to swear out a warrant, that's all."

"A warrant?" squawked Swap. "Who for?"

"The Forest Service sometimes fights fire with fire," Whopper said smugly. "Reckon we can do the same. I aim to name a certain well-known local character as a hoss-thief. With him in jail, we needn't worry none."

With this more or less enigmatic declaration, Whopper hopped out and headed for a doorway labeled: "SHERIFF'S OFFICE."

CHAPTER IV

Shakes & Shivers

WITH LONG strides the sheriff came out, tucking a warrant in his side pocket with one hand and poking a Colt into his hip holster with the other hand. He was a small but energetic man with the decisive features of a snap turtle. Also there was a streak on his determined chin that showed he enjoyed the same brand of chewing as Whopper. He seemed delighted with the demand for his authority.

"I've been layin' for Joe Dime for a coon's age," he crooned as he wriggled a place for himself in the truck seat. "That goat-smelly galoot has caused more uproar in this county than a hollow stump full of skunks. Folks'll declare a public holiday and rejoice like it was Thanksgiving, when I land him in the hoosegow."

"What has all this got to do with my shakes?" demanded Bradsky.

"Plenty, friend," Whopper promised with a new ring of confidence in his voice. "Wait'n' see."

Bradsky drove fast, taking the curves on squealing tires. It didn't take long to reach familiar surroundings. They whisked past the guard station turnoff and Whopper touched the driver's arm.

"Slow down a mite, friend," he requested. "It's somewheres along here."

"The road in to Joe Dime's place is at the bottom of this hill," said the Sheriff, pulling out his long Colt and laying it across his lap.

Bradsky braked sharply as they sighted a narrow roadway that snaked out of sight among the trees to the right. He swerved in.

Wheeling past stumps and boulders, dipping and climbing, the view presently opened and he guided the truck onto a close-nibbled pasture where a scattered band of goats stared curiously at the intrusion.

At the far edge of the pasture clearing stood a weathered, unpainted building labeled with faded letters, "DIME GOAT CHEESE FACTORY" and beside it was a tumbledown cabin with a washing hanging on the front porch.

The Sheriff reached over and pounded the horn button on Bradsky's wheel. Then he clutched at the door handle and piled out, pushing Swap and Whopper ahead of him.

He started for the house with his quick, sure stride. Bradsky shut off his engine and looked around sourly.

"Where's my shakes?" he demanded gruffly.

"Over yonder hill a short piece," Whopper said, keeping an eye on the Dime premises and taking in a wide circle around it. Swap was assailed with panicky doubts as he saw Whopper legging off.

"Hey, where yuh headin' for?" he yelped.

"For the hosses. You dicker with Mister Dime, that bein' yore specialty."

Swap started after his pardner. Bradsky jumped out of the truck and collared him.

"Not so fast, short and slippery!" he rasped.

The sheriff, ducking past the porch clothesline, pounded on the door of the Dime cabin.

"Crawl out of there, Joe!" he shouted. "This is the law and you're under arrest!"

There was a precarious pause, then the door squeaked open. A sudden violent commotion ensued behind the hanging clothes. Bradsky marched Swap towards it. The clothesline danced at the impact of an unseen struggle, then broke and dropped.

It revealed a spectacular scene. The sheriff was down with a wet union suit tangled around his neck, muffling his outcry. Big Joe Dime was sitting on top of him, aiming the big rifle.

"Come here, you!" he blasted as he squinted triumphantly across the gunsights at the quaking, helpless Swap. "Where's your

beanpole friend?"

Swap flapped his arms loosely.

"Only thing I'm shore of, he ain't sawin' wood, M-mister Dime," he gasped. "Now don't blame me! This here was his idear."

"I'll tend to him later," Big Joe said ominously. "And you too. First off, grab up this clothesline and truss up this badge-struttin' banty and load him on the car."

Bradsky released his neckhold on Swap.

"I think I'll just stand by and let Nature take its course," he said, brushing his hands together as though to rid them of something unpleasant.

ON TREMBLING legs, Swap started to do Dime's bidding. The sheriff's legs threshed. Big Joe jounced his weight once or twice and the threshing stopped.

Big Joe glowered, "I knowed we'd meet up again and settle some unfinished bizness."

The kind of business he meant, Swap desperately preferred to leave unsettled. If the transaction was to be headed off, now was the time.

Big Joe Dime had failed to take into account the little pardner's dexterity with a rope. He was unprepared for what happened. Without warning, a clamy wet sheet swished across his face and enveloped him. The rifle was booted out of his hands. He was pushed backwards, toppling off of the sheriff, head across his own threshold. The door squeaked again.

A profane outburst from Big Joe was shut off as the door was forced half-shut, clamping his neck between it and the casing. The sheriff scrambled up, red-faced and ruffled, ducked Big Joe's kicks and slammed down hard with the Colt barrel, which cracked loudly across a Dime shin.

This accomplished, he met with no resistance as he fished out a pair of handcuffs and snapped one to an ankle, the other to a wrist.

"Better ease your weight off that door, cowboy." He grinned at Swap. "It'd be better to take Joe to the hoosegow in one hunk, head and all."

Swap lurched to a porch post for support—and for use as a shield, too, in case Big Joe Dime got rambunctious. But Dime didn't try anything. Bawling loud laments, the maker of cheese and trouble grabbed and rubbed his battered shin, not even attempting to get up.

"Back the truck up to the porch, stranger," the sheriff told Bradsky. The contractor's cigar dangled from his gaping mouth.

"Say now, that was a show worth seeing!" he declared. "But I'm not running a patrol wagon. I came here for—"

"F-for shakes," finished Swap. "S-sure, Mister Bradsky. Just you go drive across that hill and take a look at what there is."

"Where's Whaley?" the Sheriff asked.

"Gone to git the evidence," Swap rattled off. "Mebbe you better go help him. I'll manage this here culprit."

The ruse worked. In a moment he was alone with Big Joe and their unfinished business. The big man glared at him balefully.

"I'm going to skin you alive when I get out of this." Dime promised.

"That ain't likely, Mister Dime, because I ain't remaining around here long," Swap said. "But mebbe I kin get yuh out of this fix."

Big Joe jerked at the handcuffs but they held.

"How?" he gasped finally, leaning back against the door.

"By doing like I say. Clearing out. Not appearing agin yuh when brung to trial, me and my pardner both."

Big Joe considered darkly.

"Otherwise yuh're out of the cheese industry for a mighty long time," Swap reminded him. "And all I want for the favor is that wood we cut. Which is partly ours by rights, anyhow."

"That all?" grunted Big Joe.

"Not quite. Them cedar logs, they've got to be split up into shakes."

"Cedar ain't such awful good firewood anyhow," Big Joe said grudgingly. "I ain't losin' much. Go to it. Split 'em up."

"I've got a notion that the sheriff'll split his sides watchin' you split 'em up, Mister Dime," Swap said.

"Me?" roared the master mind of goat cheese circles. "Not by a jugful!"

"Mebbe yuh'd ruther split rocks on a chain gang," Swap said. "Here he comes now. We'll see."

Big Joe Dime saw the sheriff coming and behind him, looming over the hilltop, Whopper was leading the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel, saddled and packed. He let out a big breath and sagged miserably against the door. With his standing in the community what it was, Joe Dime knew what to expect if brought to trial before a jury of his neighbors.

"I'll do anything you say, if you and that other piece of bad luck vamoose and never come back here," he bleated.

Swap cocked his hat at a jaunty angle.

"It's a deal, Mister Dime," he said politely.

THEN HE trotted out to meet the sheriff and Whopper. He saw Bradsky puffing up the far slope of the hill, towards the standing truck. He had to act and talk fast now to close the deal, Swap knew. Bradsky headed for him and started talking as soon as he was in earshot.

"I'll take those cedar cuts as they are," he panted. "And clear out of here before something else happens. Can work 'em up myself. But I need help to load 'em."

"Sure, that kin be arranged," Swap assured him. The sheriff and Whopper were with him now.

The best thing to do, Swap saw, was to explain the whole affair truthfully and honestly to the sheriff. He did so in as few words as possible.

"Can it be managed, yuh reckon?" he finished.

The sheriff didn't hesitate.

"I reckon. After all, you did me a favor, a big one."

"Another thing," Swap finished. "I ain't so sure that this hoss rustling charge'll stick ag'in Mister Dime."

"Sort of dubious about it myself." Then the sheriff added grimly. "But resisting an officer is a charge that will stick, by thunder. And I aim to stick Joe with it, clean up to the hilt."

So that settled everything. Swap scooted for his horse, grabbed the reins from Whopper and clambered into saddle.

"Let's travel," he said breathlessly.

But everything wasn't settled—quite. It took Bradsky to remind them of it.

"Hold on, there!" he called out, coming at Swap as he pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket.

Swap reached. But he was too late. Whopper clamped onto the money. Then he laddered up, raked the cheese-colored roan with a spur and they waved to Big Joe as they passed, whizzing off for parts far away from goats.

Next Month's Exciting Headliners

FOLLOW the Texas Ranger known as El Halcon—as he matches wits and guns with the tough desperadoes of the oil town of Bastville—in LEAD AND FLAME, next month's complete Walt Slade novel by Bradford Scott. It's a yarn you're certain to enjoy!

* * * * *

WHEN former railroad man Dave Allen buys a herd of stolen beeves, he finds himself in for plenty of headaches as he heads straight for a fast and furious gunsmoke jamboree in COW CONDUCTOR, a complete action novelet by Barry Scobee. Packed with two-fisted punch!

* * * * *

YOUNG Doc Sutherland rides grimly back to the sinister town of Linkville to face the bitter enemies who dealt death to his father in TRIGGERTARY CREEK, next month's pulse-stirring novelet by Cliff Walters. A bang-up yarn!

* * * * *

THE Yuletide spirit prevails in CHRISTMAS AT BROKEN WHEEL, a story by Johnston McCulley which contains both fast-moving action and a wealth of appealing sentiment. You'll find it good reading.

* * * * *

BESIDES the foregoing—next month's issue will feature many other stories by your favorite authors, plus another interesting chat with Buck Benson in THE HITCHING RAIL department. Be on hand for a gala number!

Galvin hurtled clear as the entire shoulder of rock and clay gave way

YELLOW FEVER

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

When the gold bug bites Ten Galvin, nothing can stop him, be it kicks, fists, clubs, guns—or even a hangrope jig!

HAD HE been armed, "Ten" Galvin might not have lived through the fight he had got himself into.

He had heard a lot about Bannack and Virginia City in the halcyon mining days from his dad, old "Placer" Galvin. Old Placer hadn't exaggerated any for when Ten had been in Bannack less than an hour he was down on his knees just off the veranda of the main saloon, wondering just how big a mountain had fallen on him and what had given him that terrible pain in the lower abdomen.

Miners' boots are as potent as the steel-shod hoofs of a freight mule—a whisky bottle often more potent than a pick handle. From a combination of the effect of blows from all such weapons, Ten Galvin slowly

began to realize that he shouldn't have horned in to help that old mossyhorn mule-skinner who, a little drunk, had sounded off and got himself tossed out on to the street.

It was this man, "Mule" Dolin, sobered by crashing against a hitchrack, who now helped Ten to his feet. Ten's attacker had been quieted down and had returned to his table in the saloon.

"Feelin' steady enough to hang on, son, or should I go get that bog-spavined old doc to look yuh over?" the oldster asked.

Ten sneezed blood from his nostrils and attempted to force a grin which was more a grimace of pain.

"I—I'll be all right, mister," he said, with some effort. "Mebbe if I could bed down some place for a time I'd be fit by dawn."

Mule Dolin helped Galvin across the street, over to a livery stable where, in a small back room office, he had a bed.

Mule drifted out to return shortly with a stout little medico who quickly examined Ten, an examination which hurt worse than the original bruises.

"No bones broke, young feller," the doctor said gruffly. "But I'd be a mite careful of that adominal area. Be best if you tied up here a day or so . . . Reckon you poked your stick into a bad hornets' nest when you started throwin' punches at Mike Paluk on a Saturday night in the Gold Dust Saloon . . . I'll have a look at you tomorrow. Meantime, a bug in your ear—don't go packing a chip on your shoulder, looking to revenge the whipping. Mike Paluk is a mite ruthless. He has a lot of companions of the same ilk. If you haven't any set business in these parts, my advice would be to move on."

Ten Galvin nodded, but he had no intention of moving on. When the doctor left, he lifted a glance to Dolin, who sat smoking close to the bunkside. "Well, son," Mule growled, "yuh takin' the doc's advice?"

Ten shook his head.

"No, Dolin. I—I'd admire to get into the hills. Yellow fever's sort of took holt of me, same as it hit my dad, Placer Galvin. And I'm not scared of Paluk."

Mule's eyes bugged. He started forward, mouth agape.

"Don't tell me yuh're Placer's boy!" he suddenly exploded excitedly. "Why, pshaw! I should of knowed it by the cut of yore jaw, and yore curly hair. Well, what d'yuh know! Uh—say, boy, how'd yuh like to tie in with me? I do some scrabblin' with pick and pan. Do some mine timber cuttin' for big outfits that are tunnelin'—like the Jewel Box company. Do a lot of freightin', too—got a good mule outfit. Could do right well with a pardner and there's no tellin'—between us we might make a real strike in one of the gulches. How's about it?"

Ten closed his eyes a long moment. When next he opened them, they were filled with smiling, dancing lights.

"Sign me in, Mule," he drawled. "I've got no other plans. But—do yuh do business with this hombre Paluk?"

"Uh—not if I can get out of it, son," Mule replied. "He's been after me to do a freight haul from Virginny City. He runs a pretty big placer outfit, the Gilded Horn. But he ain't the kind I like doin' business with. One day, shore as shootin', he'll prod the vigilantes too hard, and wind up with his feet on an unturned barrel and a rope around his neck. He owes me for the last freight job I made, and tonight—well, I shouldn't have got likkered. I prodded him for my money and you know what happened."

OLD MULE shrugged, knocked out his pipe and got to his feet.

"Got to bed down the critters now, son. I'll stick around till yuh're mended, then we'll pick up a outfit for yuh and hightail. Don't worry about me. I'll find some soft hay . . . Good night!"

Ten's mouth framed an answer, but pain choked off an attempt at words . . .

Three days later, Ten got an eyeful and earful of some real mule-skinning, as old Mule navigated creek crossings and high rimrock turns successfully when Ten himself despaired.

They climbed steadily into the hills, Dolin paying out line ends which really snapped when striking the rump of a tardy mule. He handled the four-up in those tortuous places with Ten hanging on as if glued to the side of the wagon's spring seat.

"Only man who has savvy enough to run a wagon outfit along this trail, son," Mule boasted. "All in the way yuh talk to the critters. They ain't admirin' that three-hundred-foot drop on yore side any more'n you or I am, so—"

An off-side wheel struck a rock, teetering the wagon precariously. Ten's short neck hairs prickled. He shot a swift glance down to the bottomland—all broken rock and deathly. He swallowed hard, but the team

had reached the crest, and broke into a slack-trace trot before Dolin could apply the brake.

Shortly, the old skinner had them in hand and began to point out the rugged beauty of the valley below, and the grandeur of the rugged, timber-studded hills beyond, with their backdrop of parent mountains.

"Come sunset, we'll be up where yuh need more'n one blanket nights, Ten," Mule chuckled. "Yuh'll mebbe have a muledeer doe come lick yore face while yuh're sleepin'. Uh—what's eatin' yuh, son?"

TEN started sharply, half turning. He forced a smile.

"Oh, just memories, I reckon, Mule. This country is gettin' more and more like the country Dad told me about. I'm goin' to like it a heap, and I'm tellin' you this right now—if and when there's another meetin' with Mike Paluk, I ain't spookin' none. No man can tromp me twice, unless he does it while I'm sleepin', and I aim to keep awake."

Ten swung an old single action .44 Colt round to a more comfortable feel at his right hip and slyly Mule Dolin watched the young waddy's steel-gray eyes and the heave of those broad shoulders. A thin smile of understanding touched the grizzled features of the old skinner. He bit off a half-diamond of eating tobacco and stowed it comfortably inside a cheek. Right here on the seat beside him was a gold mine—a pardner whom he could trust, on whom he could rely when the chips were down and the going got tough, too tough to handle alone.

They struck the lowland of the valley and the mules stretched into their collars in the soft turf along the dim creek trail. A speckled trout broke water, flashing brightly in the strong sunlight.

Ten Galvin felt the thrill of it all as he built himself a smoke. This was the land of his father—tough, wild, new country, but more beautiful and challenging than any place he had ever before seen or heard about. . . .

Axes and saws rang and sang through the clear upland air as Ten and Mule fulfilled a contract for mining timbers for the Jewel Box mine outfit. Tamarack cutting built hard rolls of muscle tissue on torso and limbs. Ten Galvin thrived on the work. He ate wild game and baking-powder biscuits, varied now and then with trout and side pork and sourdough bread of which Mule was a master baker.

Though without the aid of Mule Dolin's vituperative language, Ten rapidly developed his mule-skinning proficiency to nearly the standard of his old coach. They snaked and skinned their timbers in the bush trails, ready for the long haul.

Once each week, they took the whole day off, from sun-up till dark, to give to prospecting. Never had Mule Dolin lost the feverish desire to scrabble with pan and pick for dust or quartz sign.

It was up at Owlhoot Gulch that they found their color—strong quartz and heavy free gold samplings. They dug tirelessly into the gulch bank, and rigged a grizzly rocker for washing the rubble.

One night Ten sat watching the experienced old prospector run off a dust and nugget take from hard hours of rocking and washing. He thrilled at the bright gleam in Mule's eyes. A good-sized poke was filled with dust and several fair-sized nuggets.

"Close to three hundred dollars here, son!" the oldster boasted. "We've struck it! Mebbe only a pocket, but—" He broke off, then added, "Be a right smart move if we started haulin' the Jewel Box timbers and go on to bank this poke, huh?"

Ten nodded. He was glad old Mule had included him in the job of hauling, for good partner that he was, Mule Dolin had the reputation for unbuttoning his mouth after a few drinks of liquor. Ten had no intention of precipitating a stampede up here to Owlhoot Gulch. He even contested the idea of banking the dust at Bannack. The longer trip to Virginia City might have been wiser, safer. But Mule shrugged this off.

"I've knowed Paul Kelly, the banker at Bannack, for years, son," he said reassuringly. "He knowed yore pa. Another thing—Bannack has its critters like Mike Paluk and his gang, but old Virginny City can multiply them by a-plenty. But if yuh still think it'd be wiser—" Mule turned to Ten for a final decision.

"All right, Mule. I don't mind. Only I wouldn't admire to have this news get out so Paluk could start anything. We might, as yuh say, have only struck a pocket, but it's rich enough to carry us along till somethin' better shows up. No, we'd better not start talkin'."

By six-mule team, they delivered their first timber haul to the Jewel Box and were paid off in dust which Mule added to his own

poke. Bart Gadsby, manager of the Jewel Box, smiled as he consented to keep four of Dolin's mules until Ten and Mule returned.

"Yuh're packin' a lot more dust in that poke than I paid yuh, Mule," Gadsby observed. "Better go light on the red-eye and tongue-slingin'. I know what trouble yuh've had with Paluk. I hear his diggin's are peterin' out and he'll shore be on the prod. Keep yore mouth shut and yore powder dry, and hustle some more timbers along."

This was sound advice. Ten Galvin liked this big miner.

At Bannack, while Mule did the banking and recording, Ten became interested in the pretty little red-headed waitress at the Half-Moon restaurant who, in turn, had taken quite a fancy to Ten's thick curly hair and the tantalizing twist of his fine mouth.

To Ten's amazement, Mike Paluk strode into the restaurant alone. He grinned mockingly at the waitress as he legged it up to Ten's table. Ten's mouth tightened, but he got an eye signal from the girl.

"'Lo there, pilgrim," the big mucker called to Ten. "The way yore pardner's throwin' his chips around at the Gold Dust yuh must've struck it rich, huh?"

Paluk took a seat at Ten's table.

"It don't take a lot of riches to start old Mule spendin'," Ten answered coldly, his lips curled now in a less whimsical expression.

Paluk slanted a glance down to Ten's Colt, and smiled cryptically.

"See yuh're all ironed up for b'ar," he said slyly. "Foolish for a young snapper like you to pack shootin' guns. Never can tell, one day he might be forced to use a gun and—uh—get hisself outdrawed, or—"

"Dry-gulched," Ten cut in sharply. "I come here for beefsteak, feller, not advice."

Paluk's heavy mouth tightened.

"Pshaw! No need to get triggery, feller. I was just tellin' yuh. Yuh got tromped the first night in town because yuh didn't know enough, in a minin' town, to mind yore own business. Old Mule can get right offensive, times . . . Now, mebbe yuh could do business with me. I got a big outfit. We need timber and—uh—freightin'. I'll stake yuh to a wagon and mule outfit, if yuh—"

Ten half rose to his feet.

"Old Mule and I have a pardnership agreement drawn up which covers freightin', timber deliveries and gold take alike, I—"

Ten broke off. A wide smile was playing around Paluk's mouth and Ten realized he shouldn't have mentioned a gold take. He didn't like the expression in Paluk's face at all.

When the big miner had gone, the waitress sidled up to Ten with an order.

"He's as salty a jigger as ever struck Bannack," she breathed. "Watch your step where he's playin' his cards. I saw his face when you mentioned gold take. It's common knowledge now his Gilded Horn diggings are petering out. If you and old Mule have struck something, you'd best make sure your claims are properly registered and soon."

Ten smiled his thanks. He left the girl a sizable tip, strode around to check up on the mule team, then legged it over to the bank. He thought it was just as well to have a chat with Banker Kelly.

To Ten's amazement Kelly informed him that old Mule had not, as yet, made a deposit.

It was dark when Tim reached the Gold Dust Saloon. He searched swiftly for Dolin, fully expecting to find him drunk, or sleeping at a table, but the old man was not anywhere to be seen. And Ten found that Mike Paluk and his gang had left town.

It was the little waitress who came to Ten's aid. She heard his story of the disappearance of Dolin and Paluk and recommended that he call on Sim Evans, blacksmith and hardware merchant.

"Sim's way up top in the vigilantes, Ten," she informed softly. "It's one of those things not supposed to be generally known, but you know how things are in a small new town. Sim's a good man. Go talk to him."

Ten, plenty worried, had a talk with Evans, who didn't like the lay of things at all.

"Paluk's signed up with us, Galvin," the big fellow observed, "but we keep our eyes and ears on him, never trustin' him as much as he thinks we do. I'll have some of the boys look around for old Mule right away. Hang and rattle a day, and if we can't locate sign of Mule, yuh'd better get back into the hills. Need us any time, get word somehow, and we'll ride out and take a look-see."

They shook hands and Ten returned to his room above the restaurant, with two widely divergent emotions storming in his brain. One was his realization that he was in love with the little waitress; the other, even superseding the first, was his fear for Mule Dolin.

When Ten could wait in town no longer he drove his mule outfit up into the hills,

handling them with the same nonchalance as Mule Dolin, albeit with some secret trepidition. As he struck the narrow rim-rock at the climbing curve, the nigh mule suddenly snorted, backing sharply and crowding the tongue.

Aping Dolin, Ten yelled at the jenny and paid out a line end. Cringing against the tongue she reluctantly trailed her companion. Suddenly she lunged sideward, hurling her teammate hard against the face of the cliff. Almost instinctively Ten Galvin whirled in the seat and hurtled clear, continuing in a mad scramble to safety as the entire shoulder of rock and clay gave way. Screaming, the mules were hurled overside, to crash in the thunder of the attendant slide to death below.

Ten Galvin quivered in every nerve fibre. Rock and clay loosened by the major break came tumbling down from the upper levels, causing Ten to hug closely an overhanging shelf of more solid rock.

Then all was quiet. He ventured cautiously to the broken shoulder edge and gazed down. He glimpsed parts of the smashed wagon, but the mules and wagon's main parts were buried under tons of clay and rock.

Ten could not understand it. Old Mule Dolin was not a man to take needless risks. He would have known if there were any danger of that shoulder weakening because of natural erosion. This was Mule's regular freight road.

Ten built himself a smoke, pondering the whole matter for some time before a sharp light suddenly danced in his eyes. He began a search of the broken zone, carefully inspecting the area for rock outside the track of the cave-in, or slide.

Ten's eyes gleamed as he found what he had searched for—rock which obviously had been blown, and near-by it a length of tattered, burned fuse. The shoulder had been deliberately weakened by a powder blast!

All this tied in with Mule's disappearance. Mike Paluk, fishing for information on a possible new gold strike, had got Mule where he intended to make him talk. Knowing that Ten would be running the rim-rock trail with the wagon outfit, he wanted the young waddy out of the way.

Ten had become greatly attached to old Mule Dolin. He fingered the butt of his Colt now as he pondered the matter of his next move. His lips curled as they had back in the Half-Moon Restaurant to the delight and admiration of the little red-headed waitress. Ten started off to leg it to the Jewel Box Mine. . . .

Bart Gadsby, to whom Ten confided the news of the Owlhoot Gulch strike, was deeply concerned, especially over Mule's disappearance.

"I warned both of yuh, Galvin," he said. "Told yuh that Paluk was on the prod. He got a lot of his Gilded Horn claims by jumpin' 'em. . . . Know if Mule recorded his claims?"

"Pretty shore he didn't, Gadsby," Ten answered. "I was busy lookin' for Mule, and I'm still goin' to be busy lookin' for him, regardless of the claims."

The Jewel Box manager nodded.

"All right, Galvin," he said. "I'll lend yuh a saddle. Four of yore mules are still here. You wait till dusk, then take a pasear along the trail to the Gilded Horn workin's. It'll be pay-day for the Paluk miners and most of them'll be in town. That'll give yuh a chance to hunt up Mule, if they've got him hid out there. But watch yoreself. Them muckers of Paluk's are plumb salty. . . . I'll ride out and get them claims of yores recorded. Yuh've got location details?"

Ten nodded.

He ate a bite and lolled around the camp smoking for some time. Bart Gadsby had already ridden off with authority from Ten to stake the entire Owlhoot Gulch area in the name of the Jewel Box, rather than take a chance on Paluk squeezing in—if he succeeded in squeezing information out of Mule Dolin as to actual location of the strike.

As the sun westered, Ten saddled a dull gray mule. He examined the action of his Colt, his lips now thin as his eyes clouded and narrowed with determination.

He rode toward the northeast, by a short-cut through the hills the Jewel Box cook had described for him.

As the first grays of twilight blurred the aftermath of sunlight with ashed purple, Ten dismounted and hitched his mule in a clump of cottonwoods and wild fruit underbrush. He was close to the placer gulches of the Gilded Horn, but would go the rest of the trail afoot.

He was creeping over a rise of land when the rattle of a wagon outfit startled him. In the nick of time he dived for a coulee as a Paluk wagon loaded with miners rattled past. Ten wondered just how many men were left at the camp.

Dusk swathed the entire zone now as Ten crept on to the camp, his heart thumping sharply as he moved on along the main Paluk flume.

As he neared the camp, he froze as he glimpsed the shadowy form of a man legging it toward a small slab cabin. He heard a door creak as it opened and closed. Ten moved on, stealing around the empty cookhouse, over to the small slab building. He fisted his gun as voices sounded.

"Mule!" Ten muttered, edged in closer to the door and leaned lightly against it, the better to listen.

"A drink of likker'd go down purty good right now, huh?" a thick voice boomed.

Ten heard old Mule reply with a sharp blast of expletives. The oldster's voice seemed shaky, but his spirit was still there.

"Yuh durned horn-toad!" he rasped. "Yuh might just as well save yore breath. Save it to beg mercy off of the vigilantes—and my pardner. Big mistake Paluk made was when he got me drugged and toted up here without first havin' took care of Ten Galvin. That boy's got fightin' business with Paluk anyhow."

A thick chuckle cut Mule short.

"I'm afraid that's all took care of, Mule," the heavy voice goaded. "There was a mite of a accident along the rim-rock trail. The boys never found Galvin's body, but from the way the smashed wagon and mules was buried in the canyon bottom, it looks most likely Galvin was, too."

"What! By the great seethin' sailors! Yuh mean they powdered that shoulder so's to do him in?"

"I never said nobody but Nature done a thing to that shoulder, feller. Just one of them things. 'Rosion, most likely, but that's how it is. Yuh might just as well get to talkin'. Little pardnership with Mike won't do yuh no harm."

The man broke off. In his excitement, Ten had leaned too heavily against the door. It swung in a few inches, creaking a warning. The big guard inside swung and started shooting. A heavy slug ripped through a slab of the door as Ten hurled himself in, springing lightly to one side as he pulled and started fanning.

A bullet tore through Ten's shirt barely grazing his right rib sector, but his old Colt muzzle swung and a slug ripped through the big man's forehead just above the bridge of his flat nose. He pitched forward, spread-eagling on the earth floor.

Ten whirled to the pole bunk and quickly cut Dolin loose. He heard voices and moved swiftly, though he was handicapped by Mule's unsteadiness on his feet. He managed to get his pardner out back of the cabin. He returned and picked up the fallen man's gun and unhitched his gun-belt. Back again with Mule, he whispered directions as to where the mule was hitched.

"Ride on over to the Jewel Box and have somebody get word to Sim Evans at Bannack," he suggested. "Take this Colt, just in case somethin' goes wrong. Hustle now, Mule, the best yuh can."

Heavy footsteps sounded. Ten pushed the old skinner from him, starting him toward the cover of a draw as a tall, shadowy man form, packing a Winchester, came to a halt not twenty feet from Ten.

Old Mule must have caught a foot in a rock, for there was a sharp clatter of sound. The big miner of the Paluk camp lunged forward triggering his rifle.

TEN leaped out, his Colt's muzzle jerking up. "Stand yore hand, miner!" he clipped.

He suddenly swung, and squeezed his trigger as another man came in from the shadows, gunning.

"Drop that rifle!" Ten boomed. "I ain't playin' tic-tac-to! Drop it, or I'll drop you!"

The big mucker had seen his companion pitch forward at Ten's single shot. The Winchester dropped to the ground, and slowly he raised his hands.

Ten secured the man's wrists behind his back and herded him into the cabin, where he made him fast.

"Now, mister," Galvin said coldly, "start talkin'. Where's Paluk, or do I spill yuh across the bunk to join this other jigger in Tophet?"

"Uh—I ain't nothin' but small potatoes here, feller," the miner croaked. "We three was left behind here at the camp to watch and mebbe see if we could make old Mule talk some. Mike has a notion Mule struck it up somewheres around the Owlhoot Gulch country. The rest of the boys has wagoned up that-a-away."

Ten started. So the Gilded Horn gang hadn't gone to town after all.

"Where's Paluk?" he rapped.

"Reckon he's gone searchin' for location of Mule's claims down to the recorder's office.

Mule's dust was a give-away at the Gold Dust Saloon, and with Mike's claims peterin' out here, he's dynamite when he gets proddy for new claims. He'll shoot aplenty if he's crossed up—and he has plenty uh salty help."

"All right, mister," Ten said shortly. "That'll save me and Sim Evans and Gadsby a lot of shootin'." He leaped to his feet. "You hang and rattle here," he ordered. "No use tryin' to get yoreself loose, either, till one of yore outfit cuts yuh loose. You come within range of old Betsy ag'in,and she'll explode awful accurate."

Ten patted the butt of his gun and nodded in the gloom toward the dead mucker on the floor.

Quickly he moved from the cabin and found a stable where he purloined an old mule. Bareback on a fat mule is no easy riding, and this old crowbait was razor-backed, but Ten was glad enough of any sort of transportation. Shortly he was riding along in old Mule Dolin's trail. . . .

Ten would not have been surprised had he come up on Mule's woods camp in a thunder of gunfire but, instead, all was quiet, until the sharp click of a gun hammer warned him that someone was there and alert. Ten holstered his own gun as Mule himself challenged.

At the cabin, they held a brief conference.

"I've done scouted around some," Mule informed. "But didn't come across no jumper sign. I left word at the Jewel Box, so's Gadsby'll know what's in the wind when he gets back."

They took turns at guard duty throughout the night and the following day, when Ten reconnoitered at the Gulch zone alone.

It was dusk when, as Mule and Ten were eating supper they were suddenly startled by movement in the near-by brush. Before they could draw their guns they were covered.

Mike Paluk stepped in ahead of his men.

"Get 'em up, Galvin!" the big placer man boomed. "As a captain of the vigilantes, I'm arrestin' yuh for murder!"

Ten shot a glance Dolin's way, then lifted his hands slowly. From what Sim Evans had told him, Paluk probably did hold some rank in the Vigilantes, but Ten was sure he was now acting strictly on his own. The situation was tense. These jackals would hang him, and likely old Mule, too, before help could reach them. But Ten was determined to stall for time.

"I thought Sim Evans ramrodded the vigilantes, Paluk," he drawled. "You can't act in the Territory without his say-so."

"That so?" Paluk stepped forward, his face ugly with hatred. "I don't need nobody's say-so," he growled. "Two of my miners was shot up. Turn around. Yuh'll be tried up at Owlhoot Gulch. My scouts have been watchin' yuh and we're takin' over yore claims."

Old Mule came to his feet, snarling, but a man stepped in and rapped him across the temple with the barrel of a short gun.

Mike Paluk smiled his thanks to his man.

"Glad yuh just put him to sleep, Harper," he said. "It'd been too bad for yuh if yuh'd killed him before he signed. When he comes around, tie him to a mule so's we can get goin' up to Owlhoot."

He gave an order to a man who stepped up and secured Ten's wrists. Ten tried to fight, but was overwhelmed by the weight of all the other miners who piled onto him.

Ten was seething. To go out like this, without even a chance to fight, was more than he could stand, yet he was powerless to attempt any sort of resistance. He glanced down at old Mule Dolin, now groaning his way back to consciousness, and a wave of pity rolled in on Ten's tide of anger and hatred. . . .

Mike Paluk set up his bogus twilight court in a small clearing in the cottonwood belt fringing the gulch where Ten and Mule had made their strike. Dangling from an outstretched cottonwood limb were two nooses, while two mules stood by.

There were eleven ugly muckers in Paluk's gang. Paluk acted as judge, but first he wanted Mule's signature and Ten's—signatures of assignment of their rights to the gulch claims. But stolidly the pardners refused.

Paluk signed to two of his men who started bruising torture. Ten Galvin spat out a tooth with blood through his split lip, but neither he nor Mule broke.

Realizing that his attempt to force the pardners to sign were fruitless. Mike Paluk held brief conference with his *segundo,* who was obviously the appointed hangman.

"No use, Mike," the big mucker grunted. "Might as well get the hangin' over and done with. I don't like the feel of things. Good thing they ain't no law but vigilante law. We're goin' to have trouble with Gadsby and the Jewel Box outfit. Best get this over and stand by for gun action!"

Paluk nodded and swung around on Ten, a strange smile twisting his ugly mouth.

"It's the custom uh the vigilantes to ask if'n yuh've got anything to say, before the—uh—" He grinned and looked up at the dangling hang nooses.

"Go to blazes!" Ten snapped defiantly. "Yuh'd better start makin' yore own peace with yore Maker, feller, because Mule and I have a heap of friends."

Paluk snarled as he stepped in and smashed a fist to Ten's already bruised mouth.

They hoisted Ten, struggling and kicking, trying to get in blows with his bound hands, to a mule's back and the noose was adjusted around his neck. Ten half-turned, to smile warmly at old Mule who was undergoing similar treatment. He was glad old Dolin smiled back.

A man was prodding Ten's mule into position. Paluk stepped out and was holding a short gun high. His shot would be the signal. Ten's body grew rigid, his narrowed eyes gleaming with their old steel-gray light. He thought of that little waitress, Rita Kelly.

Suddenly the shot! Ten's mule started, but at that instant Ten saw Paluk's Colt spin from his hand. Then all Hades broke loose in gun-shattered fury at the gulch. Gilded Horn muckers scattered to cover.

Two men leaped in and caught Ten as his mule lunged. They cut him down. He heard the big booming voice of Sim Evans above the crash of gunfire.

THEN Gadsby was talking to him excitedly, handing him a gun. "Go get 'em, Galvin!" the Jewel Box manager urged.

Ten Galvin was suddenly galvanized into action as he glimpsed the bulky form of Paluk creeping in to retrieve his fallen gun. Jewel Box miners and Sim Evans' vigilantes were gunning it out hotly at the gulch. Ten was free! He hurtled in and mercilessly kicked Paluk squarely in the jaw. The big jumper dropped, and half-rolled, but like a cougar Ten was in on him.

For a brief moment, Ten Galvin lost possession of his reason. He went berserk, smashing, rough-and-tumble, battering in the only fight method Paluk knew.

Paluk was bigger, stronger. He withstood Ten's terrific battering, then, seizing an opportunity, hurtled to his feet. His eyes gleaming hideously in the light of a lazy half-moon, he crouched, snarling, then charged. But Ten Galvin had never been more desperate, more determined. He booted the big jumper with the kind of blow he would never have delivered to any other man, in any circumstances. Before Paluk could drop, Ten rushed him, snatched at a wrist, and jerked the half-spent form to him, shoulder butting terrifically.

As the boss claim-jumper sagged, Ten hooked him flush to his ugly mouth with an uppercut that had its birth around Ten's knees. He crossed his right smashingly to the falling man's jaw and as Paluk dropped, Ten would have rushed him again had he not caught a yell of warning from old Mule Dolin.

Ten spun and, in the nick of time, caught a mucker lunging for him. Ten caught him mercilessly and spun him crashing into the brush in a fierce flying mare. The man would not soon again have his chance to apply his heavy steel-shod boots!

Ten whirled and snatched at a fallen gun. The man he had dropped had reached for his own gun. But before he could spin into action, he heard the blast of a Colt, heard the whine, and felt the breath of a slug past his face. The fallen mucker was on his knees squeezing trigger again, but his gun exploded harmlessly as Ten drew and threw down.

There was a stir at his back. Mike Paluk had recovered and was fumbling with his gun, now retrieved. He was rising, his Colt sighting, when Ten glimpsed him. With a snarl the young waddy pulled—and that was all for Paluk. No longer would he ramrod the claim jumpers of the Gilded Horn.

Ten turned and went hurtling on past old Mule Dolin to join the fight in the gulch. He came upon big Sim Evans wrestling a Gilded Horn mucker into the ground. Another miner was creeping up the gulch to get Sim from the rear. With a snarl, Ten leaped, cougar fashion. His weight crashed the mucker to the bottom of the coulee. He brought his gun up and crashed the barrel down across an exposed temple.

Ten Galvin stepped back, and clung to the side of the gulch, breathing hard. His every nerve fibre, muscle, quivered under the strain of the fight. He shuddered out a long, broken sigh, and slowly holstered his gun. His head swam momentarily, and it took a moment or so for him to shake the cobwebs from his mind. He thought suddenly of Mule, and climbed the bank, to go

scouting in the moonlight for his pardner....

A half-moon cast grotesque shadows over the gulch of death. Old Mule Dolin mixed baking powder biscuits, while Ten sliced and fried bacon. Two coffee buckets bubbled fragrantly.

Sim Evans, blinking out of one good eye, came grinning into the firelight. Nursing a shot-up left arm, Gadsby came up. Ten took over and with help, splinted and bandaged Gadsby's arm.

"We'll get you to proper medical aid as soon as we can, Bart boy," he said. "First, we'll eat some."

As they ate, Gadsby talked to Ten.

"Yuh're a cowhand, Galvin," he said, through a mouthful of grease-dripping biscuit, "but we'd shore admire awful much to have yuh stick it out here in the minin' gulches."

Ten smiled, and nodded.

"Couldn't chase me out now, Bart," he said softly. "I—I've been struck by yellow fever, same as my dad had. I figger to stand by old Mule. Yuh likely staked the whole gulch in the name of the Jewel Box, and Mule and I'll have the security for all the time we want it. I aim to settle here and fish for speckled trout and get acquainted with the wild life critters. Soon's its convenient, Mule and me'll see about settlin' an agreement with the Jewel Box and . . . Say, we'll want to cut in Sim Evans and the boys who helped out. Shucks! While it lasts, they should be enough dust for everybody—our friends."

A FIDDLE scraped out a waltz on the floor of the new log house built by the Jewel Box hands for Mr. and Mrs. Ten Galvin. In a corner, old Mule Dolin tapped out an accompaniment to the big mucker's tune. His eyes were tired, but his mustached lips were parted in a broad smile. Ahead, lay security for the future, with a pretty red-headed little woman to cook him up some biscuits when his rheumatism bothered him too much. And mebbe he'd be dandlin' a young Ten Galvin on his knees before long.

The old skinner looked about, searching the dancing miners from the Jewel Box, with their partners from the town of Bannack, but Ten and Rita were nowhere to be seen.

Mule would have found them beside the headwaters of the Owlhoot Creek, watching the trout leap and gleam in the soft moonlight, as they held hands and talked softly of the future here in the beautiful wilds, where "a muledeer doe is likely to come up in the night an' lick yore face".

The men of the Jewel Box not only had built the lumber cabin and annex for Ten and Rita, but there was a smaller peeled log shack for old Mule.

Tonight, where the fiddle made cheery music in the peaceful grandeur of the wilds, Ten Galvin pressed his lips over the lovely ones of his wife. Then slowly they turned and looked back to the main house in the cottonwoods, where the dancing eyes of old Mule Dolin met them with a contented twinkle of a lifetime's understanding of such happiness.

How to Treat a Bronc

A MAN expects a lot from a horse, but what does the cayuse expect from the rider? Not as much, but at least a decent break in life. And for the horse-owner to know how to conduct himself in the presence of horse society, all he need do is read something that was written almost two thousand years ago. The author was the great Greek historian, Xenophon, who said:

"Never to lose one's temper with the horse is a good precept and an excellent habit. To lose one's temper is unreasonable and makes one do things one can but afterwards regret."

In other words, treat a bronc like a loyal partner, and he'll love you always!

—*Tex Mumford.*

Herb had just got set in the saddle when guns began flaming

QUICKSAND

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

Homesteader Herb Morris turns the tables on his would-be killers when grim death and danger stalk into the Rio Puerco!

WHEN the sound was repeated, Herb Morris became certain. A rider was coming along the long bank of the Rio Puerco. He paused his tired struggling in the quicksand to wait hopefully.

It didn't seem possible that anyone should come along the lonely river to save him from imminent death. But unless this was a rider walking a horse toward him, Herb was about to bow to the inevitable. He remained still now, waiting, the quicksand slowly oozing up past his waist to touch the bound wrists behind his back. The morning's events had developed swiftly after he had left his cabin homestead claim at the water

hole to come riding down the Rio Puerco to move any bogged-down cattle which might have carelessly fallen in. Less than five miles down the river, right up on the low bank, he had met "Gimlet" Rawls and "Trix" Pollard. He bitterly accused himself now of having been careless. Though actually he'd had no possible reason then to believe that the pair of notorious cattle thieves, who somehow had managed to remain uncaught, meant him dastardly harm. He hardly knew the pair by sight. But he'd had thought, since they were prowling the range where he and his partner, Roy Forls, ran their few head of cattle, that they might have to be watched.

Halting in the trail Herb had waited. The two had come right up before him. "Well—Well!" Pollard, the squint-eyed one had drawled. "It's the cowboy who thinks he's a cowman and a nester!"

"Don't you know yuh can't be both at the same time?" Rawls had snorted with anger through his broken, yellowed teeth. "Not in this country!"

Before he'd had time to say anything, Herb Morris had found himself looking into the muzzles of their guns. From then on their work had been swift, definite. Herb, ordered to the ground from his saddle, had been disarmed. His hands had been tied behind his back.

"What do you two think yuh're doin'?" he had demanded coldly.

His answer had come from Rawls who jerked the red bandanna around his neck up through his teeth and tied it behind his head as a gag. The pair then had grabbed Herb, rushed him to the low river bank and dropped him over feet first into the quicksand. Herb had hit, had instantly gone down to his knees, and had braced himself, waiting.

Rawls and Pollard had given him a menacing look, satisfied themselves he could not get free, and departed.

KNOWING the quicksand of the Rio Puerco for the devilish stuff it was, Herb had calmed his rage knowing he would have to use his head to the utmost. He had tried to "step" up out of it with slow, deliberate motions. The fluid stuff only came up steadily after every motion of his legs. Soon tiring, realizing even more fully his desperate straits, Herb had worked and gnawed at the bandanna gag.

Finally he got it free. It had dropped over his chin to hang around his neck. Once more he had tried walking or wading through the quicksand. He was in a small hole, yet it came up to his belt, and touched creepingly at his wrists.

Now the sound of a rider brought him sudden, swift hope. The impossible had happened. Herb turned his head, straining to look upward.

The nose and head of a horse came into the clear on the bank followed by the bulking body of a man. The florid face of Filo Drego broke into a grin as he gazed upon Herb's trouble.

As best he could Herb concealed his disappointment. Drego had a small office in Cross Canyon from which he transacted a voluminous business of cattle and loans. There was no love lost between him, Herb, and his partner over the venture on the Rio Puerco.

Herb and Forls, after working three years for the Granada 3 Ranch, from the time they had been eighteen until they had gained their majority, had gone partners in range claims in Wolfkill Valley on the river. In this they had been subsidized and encouraged by Wallen, the Granada 3 owner. But for some reason Drego had promptly protested, claiming that they were merely homesteading water rights to the valley for Wallen.

But surely this resentment did not reach the extent of countenancing murder. Herb fully expected Drego to be quick about pulling him out.

On the contrary Drego quit laughing, and continued to observe him with small, black, pig eyes.

"Drego!" Herb called, trying to keep the urgent anxiety out of his voice. "Toss your loop over my shoulders. My hands are tied."

"And why should I pull yuh out?" the big man asked, sarcasm in his voice.

Even then Herb could not believe the man would let him die.

"I suppose yuh want me to crawl, Drego," he said. "All right, I crawl! Throw out your loop."

Lifting his fat face Drego laughed loudly, without mirth.

"I could put a bullet through your head," he said. "That would put yuh out of your misery—but it would be murder!"

Herb stared at him in amazement.

"Yuh mean yuh ain't goin' to help me?" he asked hollowly.

"How'd yuh guess it?" Drego sneered. Hatred darkened his pig eyes as he gauged the rising sand about Herb. "I'm just goin' to ride off and let yuh be. Think of that when the sticky stuff creeps up around your mouth an' shuts yore wind off!"

"I always knew yuh was an ornery cuss." Herb answered, with cold rancor, but even then I'd never of accused yuh of murder!"

A wide grin opened Drego's lips. He gave Herb a meaning look.

"They'll find your hoss," he said. "They'll know yuh're in one of these holes, but not which one yuh're layin' on the bottom of!" He reined his horse back into the trail and went galloping down the river.

For a minute Herb Morris was stunned. And the creeping stuff had come all the way to his elbows. Even if his arms were free he probably could not extract himself. He had seen too many animals sucked down into the river pools.

He had ridden the river for the Granada 3 in the spring of the year when the wind-blown sands of the bed began to get fluid. This was the one time of the year when water from melting snows poured down from the mountains to fill the bed. Only during this season were the Rio Puerco sands dangerous.

Cattle always pawed the awakening sand for water just before the inundation. That was when they got themselves bogged down. For the bed of the river beneath the sand drew water before it flowed on top.

Suddenly young Morris stopped all agonized thinking as a peculiar sensation was telegraphed up from his boots. He waited another full minute before daring to believe he was actually on the bottom!

Because of his long experience with the river, he knew the action which occurred to make "quicksand." It did not suck. The fine silt and sand was held in solution by water coming up from unseen sources below. It simply flowed up and around any object immersed in it.

Herb could feel the water coming in from the direction of the bank now. It flowed against his knees, rising slowly up around his body. But that part of the bed a little below the flow was packed hard. His feet stood on it.

STARTLING as was this discovery, it brought a triumphant smile after a bit. He began remembering the few facts he had gleaned from working stock caught in the river traps—those cattle which had not completely disappeared by the time he found them.

This unseen source of water he decided, would probably flow out and downstream. Therefore, unless there was another underground flow above him, he might be able to walk upstream. It was his one hope of escape.

Carefully he worked his feet around until the toes pointed east. He did not go any deeper doing it. It taxed his strength to lift one foot a few inches, then the other, yet he had moved at least six inches forward when the operation was completed.

As his theory was borne out, Herb did not give way to sudden panic to free himself. He knew that he would have to be patient, and cautious. Working slowly, unhurriedly —there was little haste possible, anyway—he moved his body through the hungry quicksand all of three feet upstream.

The last few inches were made against packing sand. It was not as fluid as that below. This created an instant new problem. Unable to advance against it he must literally walk upward on it.

Hardening sand under one foot slowly, he followed with the next, and to his joy stood up so high his bound wrists came above the surface. Then he had to wait, recovering his strength for the second try. This necessitated some forward movement. Between rest periods from the almost superhuman effort, at the end of an hour Herb Morris was up to his knees. Then he merely walked out.

He came up over the low bank, reconnoitered the flat expanse of the open range about the river, then fell down exhausted. He was stove up badly, and numb from the waist down.

It was not yet noon. His horse stood a hundred yards away, range tied, occasionally nibbling in the dry twists of grass, seeking the green breaking out of the ground.

Immersion in the fluid sand had saturated the saddle string about his wrists. That finally made it possible for him to twist and pull one hand through. With a grim determination to hunt down the two rustlers and give them his personal attention, Herb set about slapping life back into his legs.

He took off his clothes and boots, getting as much of the drying silt and sand out of

them as he could. The warm sun helped restore some feeling to his legs.

Rawls and Pollard had taken his gun and belt. He searched the immediate vicinity with a forlorn hope that the men might have discarded his belt and weapon, but saw no signs of them. Going to his horse, he mounted and set off up the river at a gallop.

The noon hour had passed when Herb Morris came down from the rolling hills into the valley. His stone cabin, and the corral in back of it, stood in the timber on the north side of the water-hole, the water which made the claim valuable, since it provided year-round water for the stock, which the river did not.

At the trail forks, Herb turned toward the cabin, where he expected to find Roy Forls. A few cattle grazed in the valley as Herb rode through it.

Arriving before the two-room stone cabin, Herb swung to the ground. Forls' horse was in the corral, which meant he must be in the cabin.

The door stood wide open. Herb went in.

"Hey, Roy!" he called and halted just inside the door, suddenly stunned by what he saw.

Forls law on his side on the floor beside the kitchen table, a bullet-hole in the back of his head. The blood from the wound had dried long ago. The cowboy obviously had not finished his breakfast when the killer or killers had come in the door and shot him. The breakfast dishes were on the table. Forls had crashed the chair aside when he had fallen out of it.

Through Herb's dazed mind burned a deeper question than before. Why had Roy been slain? It was more important than why Pollard and Rawls had thrown Herb in the quicksand.

Automatically Herb backed out of the kitchen and sought a sign. That was easy to find. Two riders had come in off the rim trail, leaving their horses far behind the cabin. Mounting, Herb went up the trail which they had taken, coming and going. On the rim he rode over to the small stand of cedar trees where two horses had been tethered. Dismounting, he followed boot marks to the rim overlooking Roy Forls' claim.

The sign on the ground gave the whole story. Two men had come here before dawn, and waited. Herb could guess they had seen him leave soon after daylight to ride down the river. Then they had jumped Forls and killed him. They had come back to the rim, then followed a roundabout course to meet up with him on the river.

THEY had not jumped Forls until he was alone for they must have been afraid they would be unable to take Roy and Herb together. Of course their idea had been for both of them to be killed, so had gone after them separately.

Herb never doubted that Rawls and Pollard were as guilty of Roy's death as they were of his own attempted killing.

But why should two cowboys trying to make a start for themselves with a few head of cattle and range claims be murdered?

The motive bothered Herb only briefly. Then suddenly a light began to dawn on him. Last month he and Forls had made their final proofs. They had been notified to come in to the land commissioner's office, sign a few more papers, and get their patent deeds. They had been intending to do that tomorrow. It would be Saturday, so they had planned to complete their important business, buy provisions, and visit a few friends in town.

This, Herb Morris knew, would not be the first time a man had been murdered to obtain a water-hole. His teeth clamped together. Somebody wanted this one badly. Claims would be filed on his own place and on Roy's by the schemers before someone else got the same idea. The trouble was that Herb, who held one water-hole on his side of the valley, had not yet been disposed of.

"I see where Drego fits in now!" Herb told himself grimly. "No wonder he was tickled to see me sinkin' in the river."

Abruptly he gaped across the valley at riders coming away from his place. He dropped down flat on the ground. Removing his hat he crawled out to the edge of the rim. He did not believe he had been seen against the dull background.

Even at a distance he recognized the riders. One of them was Sheriff Taines from Cross Canyon. Another was Wallen, his long mustache unmistakable, and with him were two of his Granada 3 cowboys. The other two men in the party were Rawls and Pollard.

Herb's eyes blazed with hate as he watched the men dismount and enter Forl's cabin. They remained there about twenty minutes.

The riders had passed Herb's own cabin

as they had come over the trail from town, so he reasoned they must have searched his place looking for him. This indicated more dirty work on the part of Rawls and Pollard.

When the party emerged from the cabin, Wallens' cowboys walked toward the small barn and shed where they got boards and tools to make a long box. Sheriff Taines climbed into his saddle, where he sat a moment looking down at Rawls and Pollard. Most of the talk was too low for Herb to pick any of it up on the wind. But now Rawls' whine lifted in reply to a question of the peace officer.

"It happened like we told yuh the first time!" he declared loudly. "We was comin' up to this cabin when we heard the shot. Herb Morris come backin' out with his gun smokin'. He threw a couple of shots our way so we beat it back upriver. Two, three hours later we moseyed back and saw what you do now."

Wallen interrupted bluntly, talked, and asked questions, but Herb was unable to make out any words. Finally Sheriff Taines, Wallen and the two long suspected cow thieves rode across the valley. Wallens' men remained behind to bury Forls.

Herb lay still, watching the sheriff and the men with him locate horse tracks at the corral, then set off down the river. They were following his course that morning. Since it wandered along the river, halting often when Herb had looked the sandy bed over for possible bogged-down cattle, they would be a long time reaching any definite trails. Moreover, before they could get to the scene of the near end for Herb, most likely all trace of it would be lost in the vegetation. The sheriff might come back to the cabin, but the important sign had already been gone over.

Herb Morris fought down an urge to go chasing off down there to Sheriff Taines and Wallen. His better judgment told him to be careful. Accused of murdering his partner, he would be grabbed on sight. There were two witnesses against him.

So Herb sank back on the ground, prepared to wait a long time. He would settle with the two killers when they separated from the sheriff.

As the afternoon wore on, Herb saw the Granada 3 men bury Roy Forls in a wodden box in a grave they dug at the east of the house. After that they sat around waiting.

Toward sunset Sheriff Taines came back with the other three men. By then it was too late to try picking up trails away from the Forls' cabin. In the setting sun the entire party rode away, soon disappearing in the distance.

Arising, Herb mounted, and rode down into the valley through the falling darkness. If Sheriff Taines thought he was on the run the lawman would never expect him to be at his claim. That being the safest place for him while he waited to put an idea in execution, Herb went there.

He unsaddled, and entered the cabin to cook a meal. After that he cooly turned into his bunk.

NEAR morning Herb came awake, fed his horse, and ate a hasty breakfast. Before it was light, he set out for town attired in his best clothes. Except for some stiffness in his legs, his predicament of the previous day had no after effects.

The small county seat was alive with the beginning of the most important day of the week when Herb rode in. He had circled the town in order to reach the land commissioner's office without being recognized.

The commissioner, a middle-aged, professorish, thin man, had just opened up his office in one side of a grocery store building. When Herb came in and gave his name, it meant nothing to the commissioner, as yet.

"Morris?" the land man said. "Oh, yes. Your patent is ready."

He got a folder from a wooden drawer, tossed out a government deed and, marking two places on two documents with an "X," told Herb to sign.

With the patented deed in his shirt pocket, Herb departed from the offce. In the saddle again, he rode over to the west side of the main street, and down behind the buildings there. In a few minutes he came up behind the unpainted two-room building of weathered boards where Filo Drego did business.

The back door stood open. Someone had just swept out. Quietly Herb stole in, tiptoeing up toward the door connecting the back room with the front office. He could hear Drego fussing around.

Two men came off the street, almost running, and plunged excitedly into the office.

"Drego!" Rawls cried. "They's somethin' gone wrong! Morris has been to the land commissioner this mornin'!"

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In the back room Herb Morris lifted his gun clear. He could tell that this was astounding news for Drego.

"Yuh're crazy!" Drego retorted. "He couldn't have! I checked up on you boys yesterday. I seen Morris when he had about five minutes more to live!"

His face widening in a grin of triumph, Herb Morris prepared to rush. Yet he paused as Rawls, then Pollard broke out in a worse dither than before. It appeared that they had gone to the commissioner's office to file on the valley range claims, only to discover that Morris had been given his patent deed a few minutes before.

"Quiet down!" Drego roared. "Morris couldn't possibly have got out of that quicksand! Somebody is tryin' to run a sandy on us, that's all. Mebby Wallen. Probably him. He's tryin' to get Morris' patent proved up on because of the water-hole. We got to make sure that Morris' body is really in that quicksand. Then I'll make it hot for this wise galoot who took in the land commissioner by claimin' to be Morris!"

"How we goin' to prove Morris is dead?" Pollard blurted.

"He's got to be! There's no other answer. But before we make another move, here's what you two do. Get back to the hole in the river. Get some poles and try to find the body down under the sand. If yuh do, come away. If yuh don't, then foller the tracks of his hoss and see if yuh can find it. If yuh find the hoss, then Morris is in that hole—where he must be! Then we'll figger out who the cowboy was who come for his deed!"

"That'll take time," Rawls protested. "He couldn't have got away, and besides I've always heard them quicksand holes ain't got no bottom. How we goin' to find a body there?"

"I never heard of no quicksand hereabouts bein' over ten to fifteen feet deep," snapped Drego. That's on account of the water table along the Rio Puerco. Now, you two get out there as fast as yuh can. Probe with long poles. Do what I've told yuh, then some flyin' back so's we can start the ball rollin' elsewhere!"

The two men plunged from the office. Herb gave them five minutes. He could hear Drego cursing and fuming. The man was badly disturbed. When Herb walked

[*Turn to page 86*]

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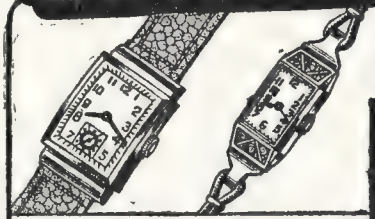

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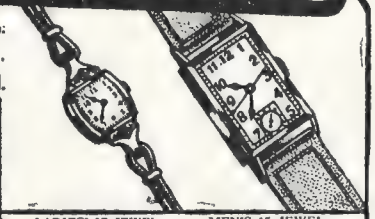

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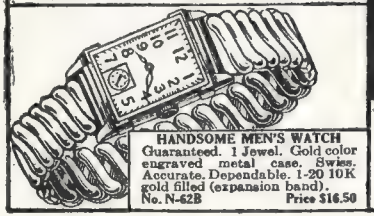

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through the connecting door, Drego turned. His piggy little eyes almost bulged from their sockets.

He came up from his chair stuttering incoherently.

"I ain't no ghost yet!" Herb said, and hit him on the nose.

Drego fell over, caught himself against the desk, and tried to run. Herb was on him in a flash. Drego got a chance at a gun. His fists working with the speed of light, Herb struck him in the face again and again. Teeth flew. Blood gushed from a broken nose. Drego's eyes began to swell shut.

While the man tried to get his arms up to protect his face from the terrific beating, Herb fought furiously, though he did not want to knock out the fellow completely. Finally Drego hit the floor and could only lay there and groan in misery.

"I'm savin yuh for a purpose, Drego," Herb told him grimly, wiping off his hands with paper he swept from the desk top. "Time I get through workin' over yore two trained coyotes, I'll have you halfway to the hangman!"

RETIRING from the building the way he entered it Herb mounted. Riding due west away from town to escape immediate attention from the law, he circled south toward the river.

The dark line marking the treeless course of the Rio Puerco had come up out of the rolling range when Herb saw a dust cloud boiling from town. At first he wasn't certain, but eventually the movement of that dust could only mean riders. Drego, much to Herb's surprise, had started a posse in pursuit of him.

Back there in Drego's office when the two thieves had been dispatched on their errand, a possible solution to the whole case, plus vengeance, had occurred to Herb. Now, anxiously watching the river ahead and the dust cloud toward Cross Canyon, he realized that his plan would be a tight squeeze play. He would have to work fast.

Crossing the river below the point where he had undergone his previous day's trying experience, Herb rode back upstream. Two saddled horses stood well away from the river. Neither Rawls or Pollard was in sight. Quitting his saddle, Herb jerked out his gun. In a crouch he approached the low bank above the hole, finally lying flat on the ground. Crawling toward the quicksand

hole, he grinned as he heard Rawls cursing feelingly.

"I tell yuh, he's done gone to the other side of the world!" Rawls insisted. "Ain't no use us wastin' time tryin' to locate a body in a bottomless hole."

The two men had brought poles and two wide boards from the range claims in the valley up the river. Rawls stood on the boards as near the edge of the quicksand as he dared. His body was bent over as he shoved a slender pole around in the oozing sand and silt where Herb had been the day before. The pole was nearly twenty feet long, but Rawls seemed unable to find anything.

"Aw, dry up an' I'll try for five minutes," Pollard broke in on Rawls' complaints. "Wonder how deep his body sunk anyhow?"

"Yuh can quit wonderin,'" Herb called down within a few feet of their heads. I'm here!"

Both wheeled, only to freeze. Herb's six-gun covered them, and he appeared anxious to use it.

"Then yuh didn't sink?" Rawls broke out.

Telling them to shut up, Herb ordered them to throw their guns into the sand and water-hole in the center of the river bed. Swearing they obeyed. Following that Herb had them bring the boards and poles up on the bank.

Herb next marched them over to the bank above the quicksand, with their hands in the air. He made them face the north, backs to him. The badly scared pair did not catch on to what he planned until he hit each with a stiff-arm blow shoving them out and yelling: "Jump!"

Startled, both tumbled over the bank. Rawls landed with his feet down, plunging immediately to his waist. Pollard, thinking faster, doubled his body, sinking only a few inches when he began jerking around and trying to stand up. Herb stood on the bank and laughed while Pollard quickly wore himself out. He was down then deeper than Rawls.

"Yuh can't do this to us!" Rawls begged shakily. "This is an awful way to die!"

"Yeah? How about yesterday?" Herb laughed at them.

"We can get together on this, cowboy," Pollard pleaded, sweat rolling down his face.

"Yuh got about five minutes," Herb

[*Turn page*]

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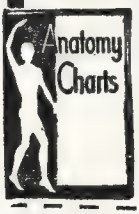

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warned them grimly. "Better start talkin' because if yuh're in there long yuh'll be in no shape to talk!"

Herb walked away, leaving them there to suffer with their fear. They couldn't know there was a bottom to the hole, that shortly their feet would be on it. But Herb was banking on such fear as they had never known, the fear of an imagined, horrible death, to unlock their lips on murder.

Mounting his horse, he had just set in the saddle when he looked down as something stirred in the grass and weeds. Sheriff Taines came up from the ground, his six-gun leveled. Wallen and Drego were a little farther behind him. Drego's face had been bandaged and doctored some, but it was swollen out of likeness to anything human.

"Freeze, cowboy!" the sheriff ordered tersely. "So yuh come to town, but tried to get away after all, huh?"

"Listen Sheriff—" Herb began.

"Grab him!" Drego cried. "There's the murderin' scoundrel!"

"Taines, lets hear what Herb's got to say," Wallen said grimly. "I ain't yet decided he killed his partner. Fact, I don't believe it."

"He'll have plenty of time to talk later," Sheriff Taines declared. "Right now, where's Rawls an' Pollard?"

"Sheriff, here's the whole truth!" Herb said. Taking the bull by the horns, rapidly he told of the events of the day before.

"He's a liar!" Drego accused hotly.

Wallen collared the land agent, and waited ominously.

"All yuh got to do is just stay put and listen, Sheriff," Herb told him. "Them boys is scared pink and will tell all they know."

SHERIFF TAINES considered briefly, muttered something about it being irregular, while nodding his head for Herb to proceed.

Riding over to the bank Herb reined in, looking down at the two white-faced men.

"Wasn't somebody else talkin' up there?" Pollard ventured.

"You two want out of there?" Herb ignored the question. "Well, yuh ain't got much longer. Start tellin' me who killed Roy, and who's backin' you coyotes?"

Both promptly clamped their teeth shut. Deadly fear however was riding them harder than before.

"It just keeps on climbin' up yore body," Herb drawled, in an easy conversational tone. "And it kind of gets yuh cold on the side towards the bank. Yore legs get stiff too. But after a while yuh won't mind it. Too late then to pull yuh out with a rope. Old sand shore does work on a critter caught in it."

"I'll tell—I don't want to die like this!" Rawls screamed. His agitation plunged him another inch deeper. "Get me out before I slip under!" It was a desperate cry of terror.

"It was Drego," Pollard said, sweat pouring down his face.

Behind him Herb caught the sound of a brief struggle. He did not look around.

"He give us a hundred dollars apiece to kill yuh both," Pollard went on. "We was to get another bonus for filin' on the two claims, and would draw wages while provin' up on them. Drego wants the permanent water-hole there because he's got a deal to buy the cow outfit on the other side of the river."

Turning away from the river as both men started blubbering details of the plot, Herb glanced at Sheriff Taines who stole up. Handcuffs had been placed on Drego who was held securely by Wallen.

"There yuh are, Sheriff," Herb said wearily. "There's yore men and yuh got all the time you want to snake 'em out with a rope. They're solid on the bottom."

Sheriff Taines' lips were two straight, purposeful lines. He turned to his horse to get down his rope in order to pull his confessing prisoners out.

Answers to Questions on Page 39

1. When heated and held by two sticks, the horseshoe could be used to brand a maverick to the puncher's own sign, or, if he were a rustler, change a brand. Carrying a running iron was against the law.

2. A steel rod usually hooked at the bottom, which could be heated and used to change over a brand.

3. Coffee, bacon, beans, and dried apples—the latter being taken in big barrels. Because of lack of yeast, little flour was taken along.

4. The average fee for a treatment or visit was fifty cents.

5. Not until after New Mexico was taken into the union in 1912. They were attached to the Cattlemen's Sanitary Control Board of the State of New Mexico, and their purpose was to halt rustling by Mexicans across the Border.

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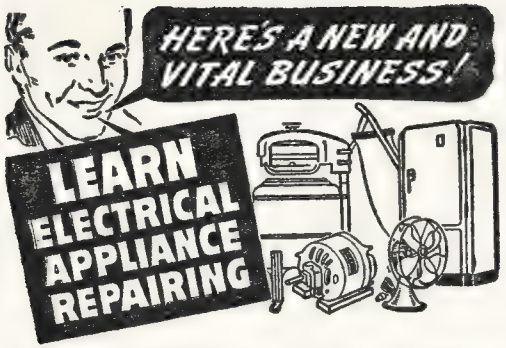

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 8)

like. His next killin' was of a young man, jest little more than a boy. The kid got into a quarrel with Leslie when both was drinkin', and to prove his bravery the young fellow talked big, flourishin' his gun. He dared Leslie to draw, but for some reason the shootin' didn't come off, and the kid walked away. Leslie followed him and shot him in the back five times as he walked down the street.

A little while later there was another hombre what was shot down outside o' Tombstone a short distance. I'm talkin' about a notorious bad man and gang leader o' the times whose name was Johnny Ringo. This hombre was a out-and-out bad man and desperado, and the whole country side was scared to death o' him.

He rode in and out o' Tombstone pretty much unmolested, so great was he feared, and his hide-out wasn't awful far from the town. He and his henchmen robbed and killed and rustled cattle almost at will for a while.

I reckon that was the reason folks didn't make more of an attempt to pin his murder on Buckskin Frank Leslie, for everyone was certain in his own mind that Leslie had put the bullet between the eyes o' Ringo. So, the verdict was suicide, and allowed to rest.

The Fatal Ride

In Tombstone one day Ringo had spoke to Frank Leslie contemptuously, askin' if he never shot anybody except in the back. Leslie let it pass at the time, but pretty soon after Ringo rode out o' town, alone, Leslie was seen to start on a ride also.

Somewhat later Leslie rode back to the corral where he kept his horse and explained the lather on the winded animal by sayin' he'd been givin' the critter a work-out to take the edge off him.

Then Ringo's body was found. He'd been shot between the eyes while sitting down against a tree trunk. He had taken off one boot, as if restin' hisself and coolin' his hot feet.

After that Leslie took to drinkin' harder, and he grew morose and ugly as he drunk, no longer the jolly, popular fellow he had been. His wife went off to California and he transferred his attentions to a woman o' the dance halls whose name was Molly Bradshaw. Soon the man whose place Leslie had taken in Molly's affections was found dead with a bullet in his head.

Again Frank Leslie was give the credit for the murder, but nothin' was proved, and

with Molly he went to live on a ranch near Tombstone.

Suspicioned o' Rustling

Neither o' the two knew the first thing about ranchin', but they was known to ride about quite a bit lookin' for strays, which led 'em to be suspicioned o' rustlin'. They were quarrelin' a lot by now, Frank drinkin' more and more.

Workin' on the ranch for Leslie was a fellow who was sort o' short on intelligence, but who made a hero o' Buckskin Frank Leslie. Pretty near worshipped him, they say. Well, this Jim Neal come in one day just in time to see Frank shoot Molly dead, and feelin' it unsafe to let Jim live and maybe talk, Leslie turned his six-shooter on his hired man and filled him full o' lead.

He pitched Jim's body out the back door of the house and lay down to sleep off his drunk, after plannin' to use the dead man as a alibi for the shootin' o' Molly.

But Jim wasn't as dead as Frank thought. He come to durin' the night and managed to crawl away to tell his story.

A posse was formed in town next mornin' and started out to arrest Leslie, expectin' plenty o' trouble and fireworks. But they

[*Turn page*]

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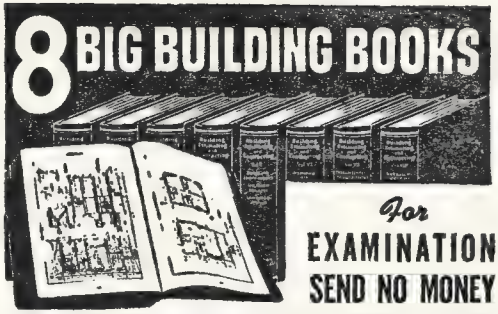

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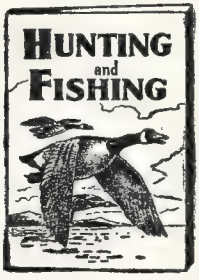

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met Leslie ridin' toward town. He said Jim Neal had shot Molly, and he, Leslie, had been obliged to kill pore Jim. He was goin' in to Tombstone to give hisself up, he said.

Full o' confidence he turned his guns over to the sheriff, expectin' quick bail and a easy acquittal. About then he got a glimpse into the next room from the sheriff's office, and he saw Jim Neal—alive! He realized too late he'd been tricked.

They didn't hang him, though. He was given a life sentence. After servin' seven years o' the sentence he was set free. He left that section o' the country and there's many stories o' his wanderin's afterwards. Another marriage. Livin' a while in San Francisco. But it's a generally accepted story that he died in Alaska durin' the gold rush days.

Well, fellows and gals, there's cattle ranches and plenty o' cowboys around Tombstone today, but no more Buckskin Frank Leslies. So, if you're thrown into their jail-hotel you can count yourself durned lucky!

Adios, folks!

Buck Benson

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

WHEN El Halcon, the Texas Ranger whom the peons of the Rio Grande call The Hawk rode into oil country, he entered a scene fraught with drama.

Miles away he could see the towering fountain of fire which he knew must be a burning oil well. It blazed up into the dark night sky like a flaming flower, bending and wavering, with huge flakes of fire tearing off and sailing to leeward like the loosened sails of a blazing ship. Hydra-headed rockets of flame shot into the air. And as it blazed, it hissed and roared like the most terrifying dragon the imagination could conjure up.

Walt Slade, The Hawk, turned his big horse Shadow toward the distant fire. But long before he got there, a voice, backed by a rifle barrel, spoke out of the darkness.

"Halt and put up yore hands!"

Slade obeyed. The next order came.

"Come down off that horse."

The Ranger got down. A lanky man with grizzled beard and hair strode out of the underbrush with rifle cocked. He came close to peer at his captive. That was his mistake.

Slade's long arm shot out with blinding speed. He jerked the rifle from the other's hands and with a single wrench of his powerful fingers, broke the stock in two and tossed the pieces of the gun aside. The oldster could

only gape in utter consternation.

But with the menace of that gun barrel removed, they could—and did—talk in friendly fashion. The old man was one of a group of farmers. There was a state of suspended relations between them and the oil men. The farmers claimed that gas from the oil wells had poisoned some of their cattle and had demanded payment. The oil men accused the farmers of setting fire to this oil well, which had been burning almost a week. The state of armed truce threatened to break out into war at any time.

They parted amicably enough and Slade continued toward the burning well. A quarter of a mile away a man ran toward him, waving his arms.

"Stop!" the oil man shouted. "Stay back! They're gonna blow 'er!"

Slade pulled in. The oil man, panting explained that dynamite seemed the only way left to try and put out the blazing well. He shook his fist in the general direction of the farmer's land.

"Three men died when the hellions set 'er off!" he growled. "Burned to a crisp, poor devils!"

The great fountain of flame suddenly exploded in sheets and waterfalls of flame. Balls of fire soared into the air. A myriad of sparks tossed and showered. The ground reeled underfoot and a shrieking wind tore at them. Then all sounds were drowned in a shattering roar.

This was Walt Slade's introduction to the troubled oil fields of Bastville in LEAD AND FLAME, next issue's exciting featured novel by Bradford Scott. And Slade was not in that seething town three minutes before he was embroiled in a fight with a huge gorilla of a man and it was scarcely an hour later before he saw his first murder. Oh, a lovely, peaceful town, Bastville! But they have to come a lot tougher to stop El Halcon, the one-man army of the Texas Rangers!

With fists and guns and keen wits, the Hawk meets the challenge of every danger that the greedy and ruthless lords of Bastville can throw against him. Notch this one on your memory calendar: LEAD AND FLAME, by Bradford Scott. It's a humdinger!

Offering Bradford Scott able support next issue is Barry Scobee with a fine long novelet of early railroad days in the southwest, COW CONDUCTOR. Mr. Scobee is an old-timer in the cow country and his stories are alive with the sights and sounds and smells of the West. Few authors we know can pack so much of the three-dimensional quality of realism into their work.

Dave Allen, the "cow conductor," had left the railroad because he had fallen in love

[*Turn page*]

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with the country and because he had heard so much of cattle and opportunity. He decided to invest his savings in a herd and become a cattle king.

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The crew didn't think much of the conductor, still wearing his peaked cap. But they agreed to drive his new herd to railroad. And then things started to happen. Little things at first, like a mysterious stampede, after which they found their herd bigger than it had been before.

An angry young cowboy rode up and reported that fifty head of his cattle were missing and he could see them right in Dave's herd. The conductor knew that something was definitely rotten in Texas. But out of that first clash with the youngster—Dave had to take a gun away from him to calm him down—sprang a friendship which was the luckiest thing that ever happened to the cow

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conductor. We'd better not tell you any more, you'll want to savor every page of this real cattle story for yourself! It's got more than the flavor of cow country in it, it's alive with the authentic feel of the Old West. Mark that on your score pad too: COW CONDUCTOR, by Barry Scobee.

And last, but not least in this engrossing trio of long stories which heads next issue's THRILLING WESTERN, is TRIGGERTARY CREEK, by Cliff Walters.

This is a little different from the usual run of westerns, the story of a kid from cow country who had seen his dad goaded and ground down by poverty and adversity and killed at last in a street brawl with a rock-fisted bully. Dave Sutherland decided he was not going to use his life that way. So he got out of Linkville and he was gone for ten years. When he came back he was Dr. David Sutherland, with a shiny new medical bag resting on the saddle horn in front of him.

But Linkville hadn't changed. Pudgy old Doc Gault still ran things his own way, with Waldo Roach, the hardrock character who had killed Dave's father, to blast a way when needed. And Doc Gault definitely had no plans for a new doctor in town. Neither did beautiful Joyce Winfield, who was anything but tactful in showing her open dislike of Dave Sutherland.

It was not an encouraging setup to come back to after ten years. But Dave Sutherland wasn't discouraged. He had some friends in town and he'd learned how to fight back. He began by bouncing a tough fist off Waldo Roach's face; he continued by dumping Joyce Winfield and her heart throb into the creek. In just a couple of days Dave Sutherland made old Linkville sit up and take notice.

This is a heart warming story of real folks, the kind that live just down the road from you, who live and love and laugh and suffer just like you and me. You'll enjoy it.

And as usual, we have entertaining short stories galore to round out the bill, plus features and departments, all well worth reading. Yes, suh!

LETTERS FROM READERS

HELLO, everybody—keep those letters and postcards streaming in! What we want is an honest expression of opinion on

[*Turn page*]

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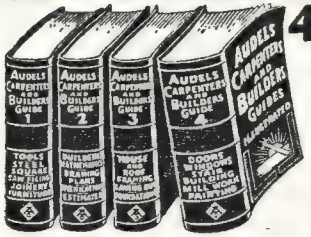

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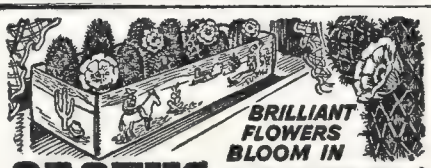

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the stories we print, or any bright ideas you might have, or bits of interesting information you think we should have, or shucks, just write in and say hello. The welcome mat is always out to readers. F'r instance—here's a good f'r instance from Nevada:

Just finished reading the July issue and enjoyed it from cover to cover. I note there has been some discussion about Bradford Scott's story FEUD AT STAR DRIVE VALLEY and I had to put in my two cents worth. Sure as shooting, a sidewinder is a rattlesnake. But he is a smaller species and never gives warning before he strikes. The larger rattlers are the ones who rattle. I reckon the little fellers are like the human sidewinders who shoot from the back.

—Frances C. Layton, Tonopah, Nev.

Could be, Frances, could be. Though whether the humans were named after the snakes or vice versa, I dunno. There are still too many in the world, I'm sorry to say, though some have been cleaned out lately as you may have noticed.

I really enjoyed THRILLING WESTERN, but I miss the old time western story like Mulford wrote in the Bar-20 series—you know, the cowboys playing tricks on one another in the bunkhouse and all that. They were a pretty cheerful crowd, not so gosh-awful serious and ready to shoot all the time. Don't you think so?

—Arnold K. Wurthmer, San Francisco, Cal.

And here's another reader with the same idea:

It strikes me that while the western story is a definite literary tpye and as American folk lore deserves a place in literature, you are doing the cowboy a disservice by too often portraying him as a dour and bloody-thirsty creature who pulled his guns and shot upon the least provocation. Actually the cowboy was a good natured person with a vast fund of humor and an enormous capacity for practical jokes. He would go to any lengths for a laugh and stage very elaborate bits of make-believe to prepare the victim. Couldn't we have more stories giving the lighter side?

—Dr. Emmet E. Colborn, Wash., D. C.

Shucks, you folks must just have overlooked the Swap and Whopper stories written for THRILLING WESTERN by Syl MacDowell which are a regular feature, plus as many stories as we can get by W. C. Tuttle, one of the best known writers of western humor in the business. Then there's Joe Archibald, who occasionally pictures the lighter side of ranch life, and a number of others.

We're giving away no secret of the trade when we tell you that good humor is a mighty scarce commodity—but we try to give our readers as much of it as we can get. If there are any writers listening, you know what to do, boys!

All these suggestions are more than welcome. If you have others, don't be shy, put them down with typewriter, pen, ink, brush, branding iron or Indian picture language on paper or postcard and address 'em to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York, 16, N. Y. Till next time!

—THE EDITOR.

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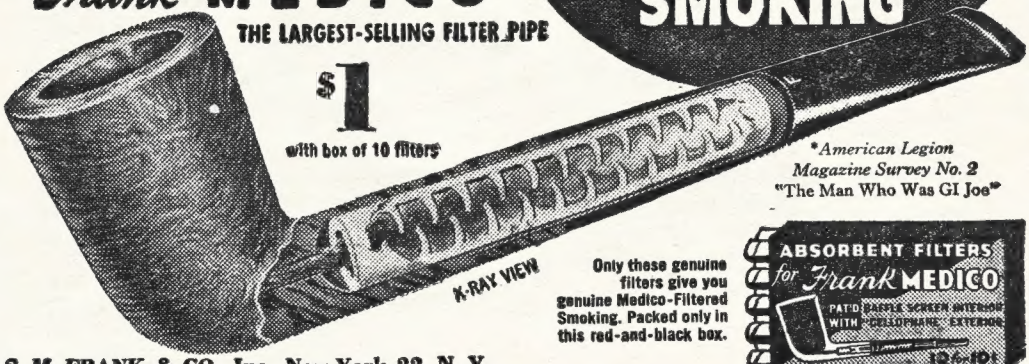

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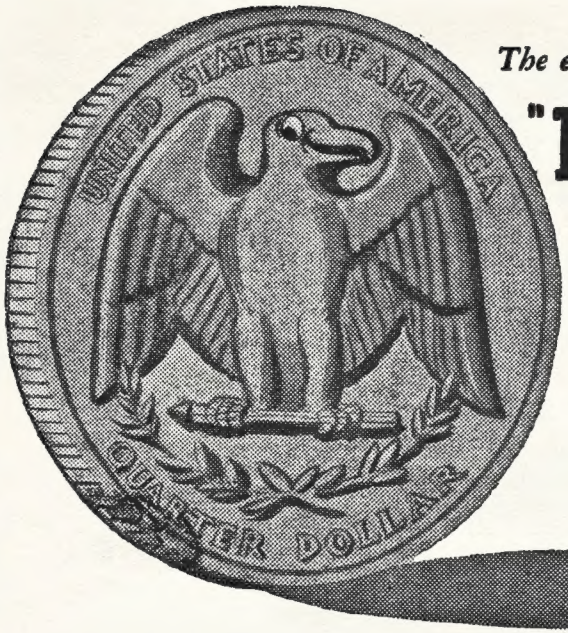

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